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# STORIES RETOLD

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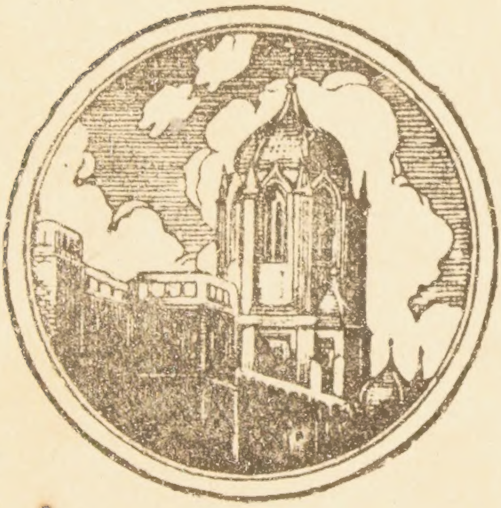
'GOD SAVE THE KING' (*See page 136*)

# RUPERT OF HENTZAU

BY

ANTHONY HOPE
*Author of 'The Prisoner of Zenda'*

*Abridged and Simplified by*
E. V. RIEU



*With four illustrations by*
DAVID WILSON

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# CONTENTS

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

## CHAPTER I

### THE QUEEN'S GOOD-BYE

THREE years had passed since the marriage of King Rudolf with his cousin, the Princess Flavia. For three years they had ruled over Ruritania, and the secret of the Prisoner of Zenda had been successfully guarded.

Yet often, when the King was more fretful than usual, my memory flew back across those three years to the time when Rudolf Rassendyll, the Englishman, had been crowned in his stead and for three months had held his throne, aided only by Colonel Sapt, Constable of Zenda, and by me, Fritz von Tarlenheim, now Chamberlain to Her Majesty. For there had been a plot to assassinate King Rudolf on the day of his coronation and to seize his throne, and we three had foiled it.

Mr. Rassendyll was a member of an English branch of our Royal House of Elphberg, and, led by curiosity, or, as Sapt would have it, by Fate, he had travelled to Ruritania to see the coronation of King Rudolf, and Sapt and I had come across him in Zenda forest, when out hunting with the King. So strong was his resemblance to the King that we were astounded; it was well-nigh impossible to tell them apart. The King himself was delighted, and invited Mr. Rassendyll to dine with us at his hunting-lodge. The next day he was to be crowned in Strelsau, his capital. But that evening the King's wine was drugged by his enemies, and we found him in the morning helpless and quite incapable of the ride to that

city. Mr. Rassendyll was still with us, and the bold idea came to Sapt that he should go to Strelsau and be crowned in the King's stead. It seemed to us the only way by which we could save the King's life and his crown, and we persuaded Mr. Rassendyll to carry out our plan. We left the King guarded by a faithful servant, we got through the coronation ceremonies with entire success, but when we returned to the hunting-lodge to take the King secretly to Strelsau and place him on the throne which our strategy had saved for him, we found the King gone and his servant dead.

The King had been taken a prisoner to the Castle of Zenda, and for three months we plotted in vain to set him free, while Rudolf Rassendyll reigned in his stead, unrecognized by his people or by the Princess Flavia, to whom he was betrothed. But the people found in him a nobler being than they had ever hoped King Rudolf would be, and the Princess Flavia grew to love him more than she had ever loved the real King.

Then, through the heroism of Mr. Rassendyll, we liberated the King and placed him on his throne, and killed all his enemies save that young villain, Rupert of Hentzau. Mr. Rassendyll slipped quietly away to England and none but Sapt and I knew of the change save the Princess Flavia. Her we had been obliged to tell, for she had loved too truly to be deceived. She had done her duty to her country and married King Rudolf, but her heart had gone with Rudolf Rassendyll.

Yet one other knew the secret—young Rupert of Hentzau—and while he lived we knew it would never be safe. He had fled from the country on the failure of the plot against the King, and now wandered to and fro over Europe making a living by his wits. He never ceased to contrive how he might gain permission to return and

enjoy the estates to which an uncle's death had entitled him. The chief agent through whom he had the insolence to approach the King was his relative, the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim, a young man of high rank and great wealth, who was devoted to Rupert. But we kept firm hold on Master Rupert's revenues, and as good a watch as we could on his movements; for we were most firmly determined that he should never return to Ruritania.

The King's health had been shattered by the horror of his imprisonment, and from the day of his release, he was a fretful invalid, possessed by a haunting dread of Count Rupert and a morbid jealousy of Rudolf Rassendyll. For he knew that Mr. Rassendyll had won the love of his subjects during the three months he had reigned, and that his popularity rested on another's exploits and not on his own.

The Queen did her duty bravely and bore patiently with the King's waywardness. But once in each year she sent by me a token of her love to Mr. Rassendyll, a red rose in a box. Then at last her strength broke down, and she determined to send a farewell letter to him and hear of him no more, lest she should be unable to hide her real feelings from the King.

I was to meet Mr. Rassendyll this fourth year at Wintenberg, for I had been recognized the year before at Dresden. I remember well how the Queen called me into her own room. She stood by the table; the box was on it, and I knew that the red rose was within. But there was more to-day.

'I must write to him,' she said. 'I can't bear it. I must write. My dear friend Fritz, you will carry a letter safely for me, won't you? And he must write to me. And you'll bring that safely, won't you? It's for the last time.'

'With God's help I'll carry it safely and bring his reply safely, my Queen,' said I.

I left her and went to prepare for my journey. I used to take only one servant with me, and I had chosen a different man each year. None of them had known that I met Mr. Rassendyll, but supposed that I was engaged on private business. This time I had determined to take with me a Swiss youth, who had entered my service only a few weeks before. His name was Bauer; he seemed a stolid, somewhat stupid fellow, but as honest as the day and very obliging. I do not pretend to much cleverness, but I confess that it vexes me to remember how that stout guileless-looking youth made a fool of me. For, through his spies, Rupert of Hentzau had penetrated the secret of my yearly meeting with Mr. Rassendyll, which had been kept successfully from the King himself. Rupert knew that I had met Mr. Rassendyll the year before at Dresden; Rupert was keeping a watchful eye on all that passed in Strelsau; Rupert had procured Bauer his fine testimonials and sent him to me, in the hope of getting some evidence against the Queen which he might use in approaching the King.

Before setting forth on my journey I sought out the Constable of Zenda. He knew my errand; and, sitting down beside him, I told him of the letter I carried, and arranged how to communicate with him. He was not in a good humour that day: Colonel Sapt had no great reserve of patience.

'If we haven't cut one another's throats before then, we shall all be at Zenda by the time you arrive at Wintenberg,' he said. 'The Court moves there to-morrow, and I shall be there as long as the King is.'

He paused, and then added: 'Destroy the letter, if there's any danger.'

I nodded my head.

'And destroy yourself with it, if that's the only way,' he went on with a surly smile. 'And tell Mr. Rassendyll to say good-bye to the Queen and have done with it.'

## CHAPTER II

### A STATION WITHOUT A CAB

The arrangements for my meeting with Mr. Rassendyll had been carefully made by correspondence before he left England. He was to be at the Golden Lion Hotel at eleven o'clock on the night of the 15th of October. I reckoned to arrive in the town between eight and nine on the same evening, to proceed to the Wintenberger Hotel, and to call on him at the appointed hour. Early the next morning he would have left Wintenberg, and I should be on my way back to Strelsau.

I got into the train in a tolerably peaceful frame of mind. The box was in my inner pocket, the letter in a note-case. I could feel them both with my hand. I was not in uniform, but I took my revolver. Although I had no reason to fear any difficulties, I did not forget that what I carried must be protected at all costs.

The weary night journey wore itself away. Bauer came to me in the morning, procured me some coffee, and left me. It was then about eight o'clock; we had arrived at a station of some importance and were not to stop again till mid-day. I saw Bauer enter the second-class compartment in which he was travelling, and settled down in my own carriage. I was alone, and could sleep without fear or danger.

I was awakened by our noontide halt. Here I saw Bauer again. After having a basin of soup, I went to the telegraph office to send a message to my wife. As I entered the office I met Bauer coming out of it. He

seemed rather startled at our encounter, but told me readily enough that he had been telegraphing for rooms at Wintenberg, a very needless precaution, since there was no danger of the hotel being full. When the whole circumstances came to light, I had reason to suppose that, besides his message to the inn-keeper, Bauer sent another of a character unsuspected by me.

We stopped once again before reaching Wintenberg. I put my head out of the window to look about me and saw Bauer standing near the luggage-van. There was a delay of five minutes, and then we started.

'Thank goodness!' I exclaimed, leaning back comfortably in my seat and taking a cigar from my case.

But in a moment the cigar rolled unheeded on to the floor as I sprang eagerly to my feet and darted to the window. For, just as we were clearing the station, I saw on the shoulders of a porter a bag which looked very much like the one that Bauer had put in the luggage-van for me. But I was not sure, and could have done nothing had I been sure. We were not to stop again before Wintenberg, and, with my luggage or without it, I myself must be in the town that evening.

We arrived punctual to our appointed time. I sat in the carriage a moment or two, expecting Bauer to open the door and relieve me of my small baggage. He did not come, so I got out. But there were no signs on the platform either of Bauer or baggage. I stayed where I was for five or six minutes. The guard of the train had disappeared, but presently I observed the station-master: he seemed to be taking a last glance round the premises. Going up to him, I asked whether he had seen my servant; he could give me no news of him. I had no luggage-ticket, for mine had been in Bauer's hands, but I prevailed on him to allow me to look at the

baggage which had arrived: my property was not among it.

Now, for the first time and with sudden force, a doubt of Bauer's fidelity thrust itself into my mind. I remembered how little I knew of the fellow, and how great my charge was. Three rapid movements of my hand assured me that letter, box, and revolver were in their places. If Bauer had gone hunting in the bag, he would find nothing. I turned to the station-master. 'Tell my servant, if he comes—' I began.

'He won't come to-night now,' interrupted the station-master. 'No other train arrives to-night.'

'Tell him when he does come to follow me to the Wintenberger Hotel. I'm going there immediately.' For time was short, and I did not wish to keep Mr. Rassendyll waiting.

'If he comes I'll tell him,' said the station-master, and as he spoke he looked round the yard.

There was not a cab to be seen! I knew that the station lay on the extreme outskirts of the town; and the trouble involved in walking, and the further waste of time, put the cap on my irritation.

'Why don't you have enough cabs?' I asked angrily.

'There are plenty generally, sir,' he answered civilly, 'but just before your train arrived, a local train came in. As a rule hardly anybody comes by it, but to-night a number of men—oh, twenty or five-and-twenty, I should think—got out, and, curiously enough, every one of them hired a separate cab and drove off.'

Taken alone, this occurrence was nothing; but I asked myself whether the conspiracy that had robbed me of my servant had deprived me of a vehicle also, and the vague feeling of uneasiness which had already attacked me grew stronger.

'Well, there's no help for it,' said I; and, buttoning my heavy coat about me, I took my hand-bag and stick in one hand, and asked my way to the hotel. The station-master directed me in a sympathetic tone.

'Straight along the road, sir,' said he, 'between the poplars for hard on half a mile; then the houses begin, and your hotel is in the first square you come to on the right.'

I started on my walk weighed down by my big coat and the hand-bag. When I left the lighted station yard I realized that the evening had fallen very dark, and the shade of the tall poplars that lined the road deepened the gloom. The lamps were dim, few, and widely separated; so far as company was concerned, I might have been a thousand miles from an inhabited house. In spite of myself, the thought of danger troubled me. I carried the Queen's letter, and—well, I would have given much to have old Sapt or Rudolf Rassendyll by my side.

Now when a man suspects danger, let him not spend his time in asking whether there be really danger, but let him face his cowardice and act as though the danger were real. If I had followed that rule and kept my eyes about me, I might have had time to avoid the trap, or at least to get my hand to my revolver and make a fight for it. But my mind was pre-occupied, and the whole thing seemed to happen in a minute. At the very moment that I had determined to banish my fears, I heard voices—a low whispering; I saw two or three figures in the shadow of the poplars by the wayside. An instant later, a dart was made at me. With a sudden forward plunge I eluded the men who rushed at me and started at a run towards the lights of the town now distant about a quarter of a mile. Perhaps I ran twenty

yards, perhaps fifty; I do not know. I heard the steps behind me, quick as my own. Then I fell headlong on the road—tripped up! I understood. They had stretched a rope across my path; as I fell a man bounded up from either side, and I found the rope slack under my body. There I lay on my face; a man knelt on me, others held either hand; my hand-bag had whizzed away from me. Then a voice said:

'Turn him over.'

I knew the voice; it was a confirmation of the fears which I had lately been at such pains to banish. For it was Rischenheim's.

They caught hold of me and began to turn me on my back. Here I saw a chance, and with a great heave of my body I flung them from me. But my advantage was not to last long. Another man, whom I had not seen, sprang suddenly on me, like a bullet from a catapult. I was stretched on the ground again, on my back now, and my throat was clutched viciously in strong fingers. At the same moment my arms were again seized and pinned. The face of the man on my chest bent down towards mine; and through the darkness I discerned the features of Rupert of Hentzau. He was panting from his sudden exertion and the intense force with which he held me, but he was smiling also, and when he saw by my eyes that I knew him, he laughed softly in triumph.

Then came Rischenheim's voice again.

'Where's the bag he carried? The box may be in the bag.'

'You fool, he'll have it about him,' said Rupert scornfully. 'Hold him fast while I search.'

On either side my hands were still pinned fast. Rupert's left hand did not leave my throat, but his free

right hand began to dart about me, feeling, probing, and rummaging. He found my revolver, drew it out with a gibe, and handed it to Rischenheim. Then he felt the box, and drew it out, his eyes sparkling. He set his knee hard on my chest, so that I could scarcely breathe; then he ventured to loose my throat, and tore the box open eagerly.

'Bring a light here,' he cried. Another ruffian came with a dark lantern, whose glow he turned on the box. Rupert opened it, and when he saw what was inside he laughed again, and stowed it away in his pocket.

'Quick, quick!' urged Rischenheim. 'We've got what we wanted, and somebody may come at any moment.'

A brief hope comforted me. The loss of the box was a calamity, but I would pardon fortune, if only the letter escaped capture. Rupert might have suspected that I carried some such token as the box held, but he could not know of the letter. Would he listen to Rischenheim? No. The Count of Hentzau did things thoroughly.

'We may as well overhaul him a bit more,' said he, and resumed his search. My hope vanished, for now he was bound to come upon the letter.

Another instant brought him to it. He snatched the note-case and, motioning impatiently to the man to hold the lantern nearer, began to examine the contents. He had the letter now, and a gleam of joy danced in his eyes as he tore it open. A hasty glance showed him what his prize was; then coolly he settled himself to read, regarding neither Rischenheim's nervous hurry nor my desperate angry glance that glared up at him.

Rischenheim laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Quick, Rupert, quick!' he urged.

'Let me alone, man. I haven't read anything so amusing for a long while,' answered Rupert.

I was mad with anger; my fury gave me new strength. In his enjoyment of what he read Rupert had grown careless; his knee pressed more lightly on me, and he turned his head away for an instant. My chance had come. With a sudden movement I displaced him, and with a desperate wrench I freed my right hand. Darting it out, I snatched at the letter. Rupert, alarmed for his treasure, sprang back. I also sprang up on my feet, hurling away the fellow who had gripped my other hand. For a moment I stood facing Rupert; then I darted on him. He was too quick for me: he dodged behind the man with the lantern and hurled the fellow forward against me. The lantern fell on the ground.

'Give me your stick,' I heard Rupert say. 'Where is it? That's right!'

Then came Rischenheim's voice again:

'Rupert, you promised not to kill him!'

The only answer was a short fierce laugh. I hurled away the man who had been thrust into my arms, and sprang forward. I saw Rupert of Hentzau: his hand was raised above his head and held a stout club. I hardly know what followed: there came an oath from Rupert, a rush from me, a scuffle as though someone sought to hold him back; then he was on me; I felt a great thud on my forehead, and I felt nothing more. Again I was on my back, with a terrible pain in my head and a dull consciousness of a knot of men standing over me, talking eagerly to one another.

I heard Rupert's laugh, and saw his club poised over me; then Rischenheim caught him by the wrist. I know

now that Rischenheim was reminding his cousin that he had promised not to kill me. And presently the talking forms seemed to cease their talking; they grew blurred and dim.

Yet I had one more vision, breaking suddenly across my unconsciousness. A bold rich voice rang out, 'I will!' 'No, no!' cried another. Then, 'What's that?' There was a rush of feet, the cries of men who met in anger or excitement, the crack of a shot and of another quickly following, oaths and scuffling. Then came the sound of feet flying. I could not make it out; I grew weary with the puzzle of it. Would they not be quiet? Quiet was what I wanted. At last they grew quiet; I closed my eyes again. The pain was less now; they were quiet; I could sleep.

## CHAPTER III

### AGAIN TO ZENDA

The visions of my dazed brain were in part reality; the scuffle, the rush, the retreat were not all dream. This is what happened: an honest fellow, with three or four stout lads in a waggon, chanced to come lumbering along at the moment when Rupert was meditating a second and murderous blow. Seeing the group of us, the good carrier and his boys leapt down and rushed on my assailants. One of the thieves wanted to fight it out—I could guess who that was—and called on the rest to stand; but they, more prudent, bustled him off along the road towards the station. My new friends forced a drink of rough wine down my throat, and in a minute or two I opened my eyes. As soon as things grew clear to me again and I knew where I was, I did nothing but repeat in urgent tones: 'The Golden Lion, the Golden Lion! Twenty crowns to carry me to the Golden Lion!'

Perceiving that I knew my own business they hoisted me into their waggon and set out for the hotel where Rudolf Rassendyll was. The one thought my broken head held was to get to him as soon as might be and tell him how I had been fool enough to let myself be robbed of the Queen's letter.

He was there. He stood on the threshold of the inn, waiting for me. As they drew me up to the door I saw his tall straight figure and his red hair by the light of the hall lamps. I stretched out my hand to him over the side of the waggon, murmuring, 'I've lost it.'

He started at the words, and springing forward to me, himself carried me across the threshold. I was quite clear in the head by now, and understood all that passed. He bore me quickly upstairs and into his sitting-room. There he set me down in an arm-chair and stood opposite to me. He was smiling, but anxiety was awake in his eyes.

Though faint, I was not confused, and I gave my story in brief, hurried, yet sufficient words. He made no sign till I mentioned the letter. Then his face changed.

'A letter too?' he exclaimed.

'Yes, a letter too: I carried that as well as the box. I've lost them both, Rudolf. Rupert has the letter too.'

My battered head ached most consumedly. Mr. Rassendyll rang the bell twice, and a short thickset man of middle age appeared; he wore a suit of tweed and had the air of smartness and respectability which marks English servants.

'James,' said Rudolf, 'this gentleman has hurt his head. Dress it at once.'

James went out. In a few minutes he was back, with water, basin, towels, and bandages. Bending over me, he began to wash and tend my wound very deftly. Rudolf was walking up and down.

'Done the head, James?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' answered the servant, gathering together his appliances.

'Telegraph forms, then.'

James went out, and was back with the forms in an instant.

'Be ready when I ring,' said Rudolf. And he added, turning to me: 'I see their game. One or other of

them—Rupert or this Rischenheim—will try to get to the King with the letter.'

I sprang to my feet.

'They mustn't!' I cried; and I reeled back into my chair, with a feeling as if a red-hot poker were being run through my head.

'Much you can do to stop 'em,' smiled Rudolf. 'They won't trust the post, you know. One of them will go himself. Now which?' He stood facing me with a thoughtful frown on his face.

I did not know, but I thought that Rischenheim would go; nothing was known against him, while his rank would secure and indeed entitle him to an early audience with the King. Therefore I concluded that Rischenheim would go with the letter.

'Or a copy of it,' suggested Rudolf. 'Well, Rischenheim or Rupert will be on his way by to-morrow morning, or is on his way to-night.'

Then he sat down at the table and took up the telegraph forms.

'You and Sapt arranged a cipher, I suppose?' he asked.

'Yes. You write the message and I'll put it into the cipher.'

'This is what I have written: "Document lost. Let nobody see him if possible. Wire who asks."'

I wrote the message in cipher; the bell was rung again, and James appeared in an instant.

'Send this telegram,' said Rudolf.

'And now,' he added, turning to me, 'you'd better go to bed.'

I do not recollect what I answered, for my faintness came upon me again, and I remember only that Rudolf himself helped me into his own bed.

At eight o'clock the next morning James entered and roused me. He said that a doctor was to be at the hotel in half an hour, but that Mr. Rassendyll would like to see me for a few minutes if I felt equal to business. I begged James to summon his master at once.

Rudolf came, calm and serene. Danger and the need for exertion acted on him like a draught of good wine.

'Fritz, old friend,' said he, 'there's an answer from Sapt. And what do you think? Rischenheim must have planned this robbery with Rupert; for he asked for an audience before he left Strelsau.'

I raised myself on my elbow in the bed.

'You understand?' he went on. 'He left Strelsau on Monday. To-day's Wednesday. The King has granted him an audience at four on Friday. Well, then——'

'They counted on success,' I cried, 'and Rischenheim takes the letter!'

'A copy, if I know Rupert of Hentzau. I am going to wire to Sapt to put Rischenheim off for twelve hours if he can—failing that, to get the King away from Zenda.'

'But Rischenheim must have his audience sooner or later,' I objected.

'Sooner or later—there's the world's difference between them!' cried Rudolf Rassendyll. He sat down on the bed by me, and went on in quick decisive words: 'You can't move for a day or two. Send my message to Sapt. Tell him to keep you informed of what happens. As soon as you can travel, go to Strelsau and let Sapt know directly you arrive. We shall want your help.'

'And what are you going to do?' I cried, staring at him.

'I'm going to Zenda,' said he.

'To Zenda?' I cried, amazed.

'Yes,' said Rudolf, 'I'm going again to Zenda. I shall overtake Rischenheim, or be hot on his heels. If he gets there first, Sapt will keep him waiting till I come; and if I come, he shall never see the King.' He broke into a sudden laugh. 'What?' he cried. 'Have I lost my likeness? Can't I still play the King? Yes, if I come in time, Rischenheim shall have his audience of the King at Zenda, and the King will be very gracious to him, and the King will take his copy of the letter from him. Oh, Rischenheim shall have an audience of King Rudolf in the Castle of Zenda, never fear!'

He stood, looking to see how I received his plan; but, amazed at the boldness of it, I could only lie back and gasp.

Rudolf's excitement left him as suddenly as it had come; he was again the cool, shrewd Englishman, as he proceeded:

'You see, there are two of them—Rupert and Rischenheim. Now you can't move for a day or two, that's certain. But there must be two of us there in Ruritania. Rischenheim is to try first; but, if he fails, Rupert will risk everything and break through to the King's presence. Give him five minutes with the King, and the mischief's done. Very well, then: Sapt must keep Rupert at bay, while I tackle Rischenheim. As soon as you can move, go to Strelsau and let Sapt know where you are. In the meantime I shall leave James with you. He'll be very useful, and you can rely on him absolutely.' He rose as he spoke. 'I'll look in before I start,' he added, 'and hear what the doctor says about you.'

I lay there, thinking, as men sick and weary in body

will, of the dangers and the desperate nature of the risk. I distrusted the inference that Rudolf had drawn from Sapt's telegram, telling myself that it was based on too slender a foundation. Well, there I was wrong. The first steps of Rupert's scheme were laid as Rudolf had conjectured. Rischenheim had started, even while I lay there, for Zenda, carrying on his person a copy of the Queen's farewell letter. In total obscurity as to Rupert's future plans, I traced his past actions, and subsequent knowledge has shown that I was right. Bauer was his tool; a couple of florins apiece had hired the fellows who, conceiving that they were playing a part in some practical joke, had taken all the cabs at the station.

My meditations were interrupted by the arrival of the doctor.

'You must not think of moving for a couple of days,' he said; 'but then I think we can get you away without danger.'

I thanked him, and he promised to look in again.

He was hardly gone when Rudolf Rassendyll was back.

'Well, I'm off,' he said.

'Are you armed?'

'My six-shooter, and a knife too. You'll let Sapt know when you come?'

'Yes; and I come the moment I can stand.'

'As if you need tell me that, old fellow!'

'Where do you go from the station?'

'To Zenda, through the forest,' he answered. 'I shall reach the station about nine to-morrow night, Thursday. Unless Rischenheim has got the audience sooner than was arranged, I shall be in time.'

'God bless you, Rudolf.'

'The King shan't have the letter, Fritz.'

There was a moment's silence as we shook hands. Then James came with his noiseless quick step into the room.

'The carriage is at the door, sir,' said he.

'Look after the Count, James,' said Rudolf. 'Don't leave him till he sends you away.'

And he was gone to his work and his reward, to save the Queen's letter and to see the Queen's face.

## CHAPTER IV

### AN EDDY ON THE MOAT

On the evening of Thursday, the sixteenth of October, Colonel Sapt, the Constable of Zenda, was very much out of humour; he has since confessed as much. He had been sorely impatient with my yearly pilgrimage. The letter of farewell had been an added folly, pregnant with chances of disaster. Now disaster, or the danger of it, had come. The curt mysterious telegram from Wintenberg, which told him so little, at least told him that. It ordered him to delay Rischenheim's audience, or, if he could not, to get the King away from Zenda; why he was to act thus was not disclosed to him. But he guessed that Rischenheim came to tell the King some news that the King must not hear. His task sounded simple, but it was not so easy; for he did not know where Rischenheim was, and so could not prevent his coming. Besides, the King had been very pleased to learn of the Count's approaching visit, since he desired to talk with him on the subject of a certain breed of dogs, which the Count bred with great, his Majesty with only indifferent, success; therefore he had declared that nothing should interfere with his reception of Rischenheim. In vain Sapt told him that a large boar had been seen in the forest, and that a fine day's sport might be expected, if he would hunt next day.

'I shouldn't be back in time to see Rischenheim,' said the King.

'Your Majesty would be back by nightfall,' suggested Sapt.

'I should be too tired to talk to him, and I want to know how he gets the dogs' coats so fine.'

As the King spoke a servant entered, carrying a telegram for Sapt. The Colonel put it in his pocket.

'Read it,' said the King. He had dined and was about to go to bed, it being nearly ten o'clock. 'It may be from Rischenheim. Perhaps he can get here sooner. I should like to know about those dogs.'

Sapt could do nothing but read it.

'Your Majesty guessed well. Rischenheim can be here at eight to-morrow morning,' he said.

'Capital!' cried the King. 'He shall breakfast with me at nine, and I'll have a ride after the boar when we've done our business. Now are you satisfied?'

'Perfectly, sire,' said Sapt, biting his moustache.

The King rose with a yawn, and bade the Colonel good-night. 'He must have some trick I don't know with those dogs,' he remarked, as he went out.

Sapt racked his brains to find a means by which the Count might be rendered incapable of obtaining an audience of the King. Nothing save assassination suggested itself to the Constable; but he had no band of ruffians to join him in an unprovoked attack on a distinguished nobleman.

'I can think of nothing,' muttered Sapt, rising from his chair and moving across towards the window in search of the fresh air that a man so often thinks will give him a fresh idea. He was in his own quarters, that room of the castle of Zenda which opens on to the moat to the right of the drawbridge. The night was clear and fine and the still water gleamed fitfully as the moon, half-full, escaped from, or was hidden by, passing clouds. Sapt

stood staring out gloomily, drumming his knuckles on the stone sill. The fresh air was there, but the fresh idea tarried.

Suddenly the Constable bent forward, craning his head out and down, far as he could stretch it, towards the water. What he had seen is a sight common enough on the surface of water—large circular eddies, widening from a centre; a stone thrown in makes them, or a fish on the rise. But Sapt had thrown no stone, and the fish in the moat were few and not rising then. He waited till the eddies ceased. Then he heard the faintest sound, as of a large body let very gently into the water; a moment later, from the moat right below him, a man's head emerged.

'Sapt!' said a voice, low but distinct.

The old Colonel started, and, resting both hands on the sill, bent farther out.

'Quick—to the ledge on the other side. You know,' said the voice, and with quick, quiet strokes the man swam across the moat till he was hidden in the triangle of deep shade formed by the meeting of the drawbridge and the castle wall. Sapt watched him go, almost stupefied by the sudden wonder of hearing that voice come to him out of the stillness of the night. For the King was abed; and who spoke in that voice save the King and one other?

Then he turned and walked quickly across the room. Opening the door, he found himself in the passage. But here he ran right into the arms of young Bernenstein, the Officer of the Guard, who was going on his rounds. Sapt knew and trusted him.

He noticed Sapt's bearing, for he cried out in a low voice:

'Anything wrong, sir?'

'Bernenstein, my boy, the Castle's all right about here. Go round to the front, and stay there,' he said.

The officer stared, as well he might. Sapt caught him by the arm.

'No, stay here. See, stand facing the door there that leads to the royal apartments. Stand there, and let nobody pass. You understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And whatever you hear, don't look round.'

Bernenstein's bewilderment grew greater; but Sapt was Constable, and on Sapt's shoulders lay the responsibility for the safety of Zenda and all in it.

'Very well, sir,' he said, and he drew his sword and stood by the door.

Sapt ran on. Opening the gate that led to the bridge, he sped across. Then he descended the steps down to the ledge above the water. He also was now in the triangle of deep darkness, yet he knew that a man was there, who stood straight and tall, rising above his own height. And he felt his hand caught in a sudden grip. Rudolf Rassendyll was there, in his wet drawers and socks.

'Is it you?' he whispered.

'Yes,' answered Rudolf. 'Lay hold of me a minute while I get on my breeches: I didn't want to get wet, so I carried my clothes in a bundle. Hold me tight—it's slippery.'

'In God's name, what brings you here?' whispered Sapt, catching Rudolf by the arm as he was directed.

'The Queen's service. When does Rischenheim come?'

'To-morrow at eight.'

'That's earlier than I thought. And the King?'

'Is here and determined to see him. It's impossible to move him from it.'

There was a moment's silence; Rudolf drew his shirt over his head and tucked it into his trousers. 'Give me the jacket and waistcoat,' he said. 'Now the boots, and I'm ready.' Then he asked quickly, 'Has the King seen or heard from Rischenheim?'

'Neither, except through me.'

'Then why is he so set on seeing him?'

'To find out what gives dogs smooth coats.'

'You're serious? I can't see your face.'

'Absolutely.'

'All's well, then. Has the King got a beard now?'

'Yes.'

'Confound him! Can't you take me anywhere to talk?'

'What are you here at all for?'

'To meet Rischenheim. Sapt, he's got a copy of the Queen's letter.'

Sapt twirled his moustache.

'I've always said as much,' he remarked in tones of satisfaction. He need not have said it, though he would have been more than human not to think it. 'Come along,' and the Constable climbed the steps.

Having crossed the bridge, they entered the castle. The passage was empty save for Bernenstein, whose broad back barred the way from the royal apartments.

'In here,' whispered Sapt, laying his hand on the door of the room whence he had come.

'All right,' answered Rudolf. Bernenstein's hand twitched, but he did not look round. There was discipline in the Castle of Zenda.

But as Sapt was half-way through the door and Rudolf about to follow him, the other door, that which Bernenstein guarded, was softly yet swiftly opened.

In the doorway stood Queen Flavia, all in white; and now her face turned white as her dress. For her eyes had fallen on Rudolf Rassendyll. For a moment the four stood thus; then Rudolf passed Sapt, thrust Bernenstein's brawny shoulders (the young man had not looked round) out of the way, and, falling on his knee before the Queen, seized her hand and kissed it.

Bernenstein could see now without looking round, and if astonishment could kill, he would have been a dead man that instant. For the King was in bed, and had a beard; yet here was the King, fully dressed and clean-shaven, and he was kissing the Queen's hand, while she gazed down on him in a struggle between amazement, fright and joy.

No more than a moment had passed before, with eager imperative gestures, Sapt beckoned them to enter the room. The Queen obeyed, and Rudolf followed her.

'Let nobody in, and don't say a word to anybody,' whispered Sapt, as he entered, leaving Bernenstein outside.

It was eleven o'clock when the Queen came, and midnight had struck from the great clock of the Castle before the door opened again and Sapt came out. His sword was not drawn, but he had his revolver in his hand. He shut the door silently after him and began at once to talk in low, earnest, quick tones to Bernenstein. Bernenstein listened intently and without interrupting. Sapt's story ran on for eight or nine minutes. Then he paused, before asking:

'You understand now?'

'Yes, it is wonderful,' said the young man, drawing in his breath.

'Pooh!' said Sapt. 'Nothing is wonderful: some things are unusual.'



'In the doorway stood Queen Flavia.'

Bernenstein was not convinced, and shrugged his shoulders in protest.

'Well?' said the Constable with a quick glance at him.

'I would die for the Queen, sir,' he answered.

'Good,' said Sapt, 'then listen,' and he began again to talk. Bernenstein nodded from time to time. 'You'll meet Rischenheim at the gate,' said the Constable, 'and bring him straight here. He's not to go anywhere else, you understand me?'

'Perfectly, Colonel,' smiled young Bernenstein.

'The King will be in this room—the King. You know who is the King?'

'Perfectly, Colonel.'

'And when the interview is ended, and we go in to breakfast——'

'I know who will be the King then. Yes, Colonel.'

'Good. But we do Rischenheim no harm unless——'

'It is necessary.'

'Precisely.'

Sapt turned away with a little sigh. Bernenstein was an apt pupil, but the Colonel was exhausted by so much explanation. He knocked softly at the door of the room. The Queen's voice bade him enter, and he passed in. Bernenstein was left alone again in the passage, pondering over what he had heard.

At one o'clock Colonel Sapt came out.

'Go to bed till six,' said he to Bernenstein.

'I am not sleepy.'

'No, but you will be at eight if you don't sleep now.'

'Is the Queen coming out, Colonel?'

'In a minute, Lieutenant.'

'I should like to kiss her hand.'

Rudolf Rassendyll opened the door and the Queen appeared on the threshold. She was very pale, and she had been crying, but her eyes were happy and her air firm. The moment he saw her young Bernenstein fell on his knees and raised her hand to his lips.

'To the death, madame,' said he in a trembling voice.

'I knew it, sir,' she answered graciously. Then she looked round on the three of them. 'Gentlemen,' said she, 'my servants and dear friends, with you rests my honour.'

She passed through the door, and Sapt shut it after her.

'Now to business,' he said drily. And he went and ordered breakfast for the King and Count Rischenheim at nine o'clock precisely. This done, he returned to the room where Rudolf was, carried a chair into the passage, bade Rudolf lock the door, sat down outside revolver in hand, and himself went to sleep. Thus the hours from two to six passed that morning in the Castle of Zenda.

At six the Constable awoke and knocked at the door; Rudolf Rassendyll opened it.

Sapt entered and looked round. The curtains of the window were half-drawn, the table was moved nearer to the wall, and the arm-chair by it was well in shadow, being quite close to the curtains.

'There's plenty of room for you behind,' said Rudolf; 'and when Rischenheim is seated in his chair opposite to mine, you can put your revolver against his head by just stretching out your hand. And of course I can do the same.'

'Yes, it looks well enough,' said Sapt, with an approving nod.

'What about the beard?'

'Bernenstein is to tell Rischenheim that the King shaved this morning.'

'Will he believe that?'

'Why not? For his own sake he'd better believe everything.'

Rudolf Rassendyll took a turn up and down the room. It was easy to see that the events of the night had disturbed him. His thoughts were interrupted by the clock striking seven.

'He'll be here in an hour,' said he.

Thus they made ready for the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim, while my cursed wound held me a prisoner at Wintenberg. It is still a sorrow to me that I know what passed that morning only by report, and had not the honour of bearing a part in it.

## CHAPTER V

### AN AUDIENCE OF THE KING

At ten minutes to eight, young Bernenstein, very smartly accoutred, took his stand outside the main entrance of the Castle. He had not long to wait. On the stroke of eight a gentleman rode up the carriage drive. Bernenstein, crying 'Ah, it is the Count!' ran to meet him. Rischenheim dismounted, holding out his hand to the young officer.

'My dear Bernenstein!' said he, for they were acquainted with one another.

'You're punctual, my dear Rischenheim, and it's lucky, for the King awaits you most impatiently.'

'I didn't expect to find him up so soon,' remarked Rischenheim.

'Up! He's been up these two hours. Treat him carefully, my dear Count; he's in one of his troublesome humours. When the barber came to trim his beard there were—imagine it, Count!—no less than seven grey hairs. The King fell into a passion. "Take it off," he said. "Take it off. I won't have a grey beard!" So it's taken off.'

'His beard!'

'His beard, my dear Count. And now he's waiting most eagerly for you. Come along.' And Bernenstein, passing his arm through the Count's, walked him rapidly into the Castle.

Rischenheim was a young man not versed in intrigue. He was decidely pale this morning; his manner

was uneasy, and his hands trembled. Hardly noting where he went, he allowed Bernenstein to lead him quickly and directly towards the room where Rudolf Rassendyll was, not doubting that he was being conducted to the King's presence.

'Breakfast is ordered for nine,' said Bernenstein, 'but he wants to see you before.'

They had arrived now at the door. Here Bernenstein paused.

'I am ordered to wait outside till his Majesty summons me,' he said, 'I'll open the door and announce you.' And he flung the door open, saying, 'Sire, the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim has the honour to wait on your Majesty.' With this he shut the door promptly, and stood against it.

The Count advanced, bowing low and striving to conceal a visible agitation. He saw the King in his arm-chair; his face was in deep shadow, but Rischenheim perceived that the beard was indeed gone. The King held out his hand to Rischenheim, and motioned him to sit in a chair just opposite to him and within a foot of the window-curtains.

'I am delighted to see you, my lord,' he said.

Rischenheim looked up. Rudolf's voice had once been so like the King's that no man could tell the difference, but in the last year or two the King's had grown weaker, and Rischenheim seemed to be struck by the vigour of the tones in which he was addressed.

'Most delighted,' pursued Mr. Rassendyll. 'For I am pestered beyond endurance about those dogs. I can't get the coats right. Now yours are magnificent.'

'You are very good, sire. But I ventured to ask an audience in order to——'

'Positively you must tell me about the dogs. And

before Sapt comes, for I want nobody to hear but myself.'

'Your Majesty expects Colonel Sapt?'

'In about twenty minutes,' said the King, with a glance at the clock on the mantelpiece.

At this Rischenheim became all on fire to get his errand done before Sapt appeared.

'I have a most urgent and important matter——' he began.

Rudolf threw himself back in his chair with a peevish air.

'Well, if you must, you must. What is this great affair, Count? Let us have it over, and then you can tell me about the dogs.'

'Sire, my cousin, the Count of Hentzau, has entrusted me with a message.'

Rudolf suddenly assumed a stern air.

'I can hold no communication with the Count of Hentzau,' said he.

'Pardon me, sire. A document has come into the Count's hands which is of vital importance to your Majesty. There is a conspiracy against your Majesty's honour.'

'By whom, my lord?' asked Rudolf in cold and doubting tones.

'By those who are very near your Majesty's person and very high in your Majesty's love.'

'Name them.'

'Sire, I dare not. You would not believe me. But your Majesty will believe written evidence.'

'Show it me, and quickly. We may be interrupted.'

'Sire, I have a copy——'

'Oh, a copy, my lord?' sneered Rudolf.

'My cousin has the original, and will forward it at

your Majesty's command. A copy of a letter of her Majesty's.'

'Of the Queen's?'

'Yes, sire. It is addressed to a Mr. Rudolf Rassendyll.'

Now Rudolf played his part well. He did not feign indifference, but allowed his voice to tremble with emotion as he stretched out his hand and said in a hoarse whisper:

'Give it me, give it me.'

Rischenheim's eyes sparkled. Plainly he had stirred the suspicions and jealousy of the King.

He unbuttoned his coat, then his waistcoat. The head of a revolver showed in a belt round his waist. He undid the flap of a pocket in the lining of his waistcoat, and began to draw out a sheet of paper. But Rudolf, great as his powers of self-control were, was but human. When he saw the paper, he leant forward, half rising from his chair. As a result, his face came beyond the shadow of the curtain, and the full morning light beat on it. As Rischenheim took the paper out, he looked up. He saw the face that glared so eagerly at him; his eyes met Rassendyll's; a sudden suspicion seized him, for the face, though the King's face in every feature, showed a stern resolution and a vigour that were not the King's. In that instant the truth flashed across his mind. He gave a cry; in one hand he crumpled up the paper, the other flew to his revolver. But he was too late. Rudolf's left hand encircled his hand and the paper in an iron grip; Rudolf's revolver was on his temple; and an arm was stretched out from behind the curtain, holding another barrel full before his eyes, while a dry voice said: 'You'd best take it quietly.' Then Sapt stepped out. His revolver held Rischenheim motionless while

Rudolf wrenched the precious document from his fingers. The Count could do nothing but stare at Mr. Rassendyll.

'Now tell us, sir, where did you leave this cousin of yours?' said Rudolf. For the plan was to find out from Rischenheim where Rupert was, and to set off in pursuit of Rupert as soon as they had disposed of Rischenheim.

But even as Rudolf spoke there was a violent knock at the door. Rudolf sprang to open it. Bernenstein was on the threshold, open-mouthed.

'The King's servant has just gone by. He's looking for Colonel Sapt. The King has been walking in the drive, and learnt from a sentry of Rischenheim's arrival. I told the man that you had taken the Count for a stroll round the Castle, and I did not know where you were. He says that the King may come himself at any moment.'

Sapt considered for one short instant; then he was back by Rischenheim's side.

'We must talk again later on,' he said, in low quick tones. 'Now you're going to breakfast with the King. I shall be there, and Bernenstein. Remember, not a word of your errand, not a word of this gentleman! At a word, a sign, a hint, a gesture, a motion, I'll put a bullet through your head. Rudolf, get behind the curtain. If there's an alarm you must jump through the window into the moat and swim for it.'

'All right,' replied Mr. Rassendyll.

'Well,' said an angry voice outside, 'I wondered how long I was to be kept waiting.'

Rudolf Rassendyll skipped behind the curtain. Sapt's revolver slipped into a handy pocket. Then the King walked in, pale and full-bearded.

'Ah, Count,' said he, 'I'm glad to see you. I want to ask you about these dogs. Now tell me, Count——'

'Your pardon, sire,' put in young Bernenstein, 'but breakfast waits.'

'Yes, yes. Well, then, we'll have them together—breakfast and the dogs. Come along, Count.' The King passed his arm through Rischenheim's, adding to Bernenstein, 'Lead the way, Lieutenant; and you Colonel, come with us.'

The Count of Luzau-Rischenheim did not make a very good breakfast. He sat opposite to the King. Colonel Sapt placed himself at the back of the King's chair, and Rischenheim saw the muzzle of a revolver resting on the top of the chair just behind his Majesty's right ear. Bernenstein stood by the door.

'You're eating nothing,' said the King. 'I hope you're not indisposed?'

'I am a little upset, sire,' stammered Rischenheim, and truly enough.

'Well, tell me about the dogs while I eat; for I'm hungry.'

Rischenheim began to disclose his secret. His statement was decidedly wanting in clearness. The King grew impatient.

'I don't understand,' said he testily. 'Tell it me all over again.' Rischenheim did as he was bid.

'Ah, I understand a little better now. Do you see, Sapt?' and he turned his head round towards the Constable. Sapt had just time to whisk the revolver away.

'Perfectly, sire,' said he. 'I understand all the Count wishes to convey to your Majesty.'

'Well, I understand about half,' said the King with a laugh. 'But perhaps that'll be enough.'

'I think quite enough, sire,' answered Sapt with a smile.

The important matter of the dogs being thus disposed

of, the King recollected that the Count had asked for an audience on a matter of business.

'Now what did you wish to say to me?' he asked with a weary air. The dogs had been more interesting.

Rischenheim saw a chance.

'Your pardon, sire,' said he, 'but we are not alone.'

The King lifted his eye-brows.

'Is the business so private?' he asked.

'I should prefer to tell it to your Majesty alone,' pleaded the Count.

Now Sapt was resolved not to leave Rischenheim alone with the King. He leant over the King's shoulder, and said with a sneer:

'Messages from Rupert of Hentzau are too exalted matters for my poor ears, it seems.'

The King flushed red.

'Is that your business, my lord?' he asked Rischenheim sternly.

'Your Majesty does not know what my cousin——'

'It is the old story?' interrupted the King. 'He wants to come back? Is that all, or is there anything else?'

Rischenheim sat silent.

'Are you dumb, my lord?' cried the King most impatiently.

'It—it is—only what you call the old story, sire.'

'Then let me say that you have treated me very badly in obtaining an audience of me for any such purpose,' said the King, rising. 'Colonel Sapt, see that the Count is well entertained. My horse should be at the door by now. Farewell, Count. Bernenstein, give me your arm.'

Bernenstein shot a rapid glance at the Constable. Sapt nodded reassuringly. Bernenstein gave his arm to

the King. They passed through the door, and Bernenstein closed it with a backward push of his hand. But at this moment Rischenheim, goaded to fury and desperate at the trick played on him, made a sudden rush at the door. He reached it, and his hand was on the door-knob. But Sapt was upon him, and Sapt's revolver was at his ear.

'If you open the door,' said the Constable, 'I will shoot you through the head.'

As he spoke there came a knock at the door.

'Open it,' he said brusquely to Rischenheim. With a muttered curse the Count obeyed him. A servant stood outside with a telegram on a salver. 'Take it,' whispered Sapt, for the telegram was addressed to Rischenheim.

The servant bowed and shut the door.

'You can have no secrets from so good a friend as I am, my lord. Be quick and open the telegram,' said Sapt.

The Count began to open it.

'If you tear it up or crumple it, I'll shoot you,' said Sapt quietly. 'You know you can trust my word. Now read it.'

The muzzle was within a foot of his head. He unfolded the telegram. Then he looked at Sapt.

'Read, my lord, read!'

Then he read, and this was the telegram:

'Holf, 19 Königstrasse.'

'A thousand thanks, my lord. And the place it's despatched from?'

'Strelsau.'

'You're puzzled what it means, Count?'

'I don't know at all what it means.'

'I think, my lord, that the message is an address.'

An address! I never thought of that. But I know no Holf.'

'I don't think it's Holf's address.'

'Whose then?' asked Rischenheim, looking furtively at the Constable.

'Why,' said Sapt, 'the present address of Count Rupert of Hentzau in Strelsau.'

## CHAPTER VI

### THE TASK OF THE QUEEN'S SERVANTS

I RECOVERED my strength so rapidly that I was on my way home not much more than twelve hours after Rudolf Rassendyll left me. Thus I arrived at my own house in Strelsau on the same Friday morning that witnessed the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim's twofold interview with the King at the Castle of Zenda. The moment I had arrived, I sent James to despatch a message to the Constable, acquainting him with my whereabouts. Sapt received this message while a council of war was being held, and the information it gave aided not a little in the arrangements that the Constable and Rudolf Rassendyll made. What these were I must now relate.

That council of war in Zenda was held under no common circumstances. Cowed as Rischenheim appeared, they dared not let him out of their sight; Rudolf could not leave the room into which Sapt had locked him; the King's absence was to be short, and before he came again Rudolf must be gone, Rischenheim safely disposed of, and measures taken against the original letter reaching the King.

The room was a large one. In the corner farthest from the door sat Rischenheim, disarmed, dispirited, to all seeming ready to throw up his dangerous game and acquiesce in any terms presented to him. Just inside the door were the other three—Bernenstein merry and triumphant, Sapt blunt and cool, Rudolf calm and clear-headed. They conversed together in low tones. Presently Sapt took paper and wrote. This first

message was to me, and it bade me come to Zenda that afternoon. Then followed more deliberation; Rudolf took up the talking now, for his was the bold plan on which they consulted.

'It's dangerous, but the best thing,' said Rudolf, carefully sinking his voice yet lower, lest the prisoner should catch the lightest word of what he said. 'It involves my staying here till the evening. Is that possible?'

'No; but you can leave here and hide in the forest till I join you,' said Sapt.

Then Rudolf in his turn took paper, and here is the message that he wrote in Rischenheim's name:

'Holf, 19 Königstrasse, Strelsau. All well. He has what I had, but wishes to see what you have. He and I will be at the hunting-lodge at ten this evening. Bring it and meet us. The business is unsuspected.—L-R.'

Rudolf flung the paper across to Sapt: Bernenstein leant over the Constable's shoulder and read it eagerly.

'I doubt if it would bring me,' grinned old Sapt, throwing the paper down.

'It'll bring Rupert of Hentzau. He'll know that the King will wish to meet him unknown to the Queen, and also unknown to you, Sapt, since you were my friend: what place more likely for the King to choose than his hunting-lodge, where he is accustomed to go when he wishes to be alone? The message will bring him, depend on it.'

'Then—when he comes?' asked Bernenstein.

'He finds such a king as Rischenheim found, and Sapt, here, at his elbow.'

'But he'll know you,' objected Bernenstein.

'Aye, I think he'll know me,' said Rudolf with a

smile. 'Meanwhile we send for Fritz to come here and look after the King.'

'And Rischenheim?'

'That's your share, Lieutenant. Sapt, is any one at the Castle of Tarlenheim?'

'No. The owner has put it at Fritz's disposal.'

'Good; then Fritz's two friends, the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim and Lieutenant von Bernenstein, will ride over there to-day. The Constable of Zenda will give the Lieutenant twenty-four hours' leave of absence, and the two gentlemen will pass the day and sleep at the Castle. And one of them will not close his eyes nor take his hand off the butt of his revolver.'

'Very good, sir,' said young Bernenstein.

Thus their plans were laid. If they could defeat Rupert, they would have Rischenheim at their mercy. If they could keep Rischenheim out of the way while they used his name in their trick, they had a strong chance of deluding and killing Rupert. Yes, of killing him; for that and nothing less was their purpose, as the Constable of Zenda himself has told me.

'We would have stood on no ceremony,' he said. 'The Queen's honour was at stake, and the fellow himself is an assassin.'

Bernenstein rose and went out. Rudolf and Sapt explained to Rischenheim what they proposed to do with him. He heard what they said with a dull uninterested air.

'Let me advise you, my lord,' said Rudolf, looking down on him kindly enough, 'if you come safe through this affair, to add honour to your prudence, and chivalry to your honour. There is still time for you to become a gentleman.'

He turned away, followed by a glance of anger from the Count and a chuckle from old Sapt.

A few moments later Bernenstein returned. Horses for himself and Rischenheim were at the gate of the Castle. After a few final words from Rudolf, the Lieutenant motioned to his prisoner to accompany him, and they two walked out together, being to all appearance willing companions and in perfect friendliness with one another.

It was now well on in the morning, and the risk of Rudolf's sojourn in the castle grew greater with every moment. The hardest task was to contrive a free escape for Mr. Rassendyll. To meet this necessity, the Constable issued orders that the company of Guards which garrisoned the Castle should parade at one o'clock in the park, and that the servants should all be granted permission to watch the manœuvres. By this means he counted on drawing off any curious eyes and allowing Rudolf to reach the forest unobserved. They appointed a rendezvous in a handy and sheltered spot.

While Sapt was making his arrangements, Queen Flavia came to the room where Rudolf Rassendyll was. First she learnt from him the plans that had been made, and, although she trembled at the danger that he must run in meeting Rupert of Hentzau, she had such a trust in his powers that she seemed to doubt little of his success. But she began to reproach herself for having brought him into this peril by writing her letter. At this he took from his pocket the copy that Rischenheim had carried. He had found time to read it, and now before her eyes he kissed it.

'Had I as many lives as there are words, my Queen,' he said softly, 'for each word I would gladly give a life.'

'Rudolf,' she said, speaking quickly, 'last night I had a dream about you, a strange dream. I seemed to be in

Strelsau, and all the people were talking about the King. It was you they meant; you were the King. At last you were the real King, and I was your Queen. But I could see you only very dimly. Then I tried to tell you that you were King—yes, and Colonel Sapt and Fritz tried to tell you; the people too called out that you were King. But your face, when I saw it, was unmoved and very pale, and you seemed not to hear what we said. It almost seemed as if you were dead, and yet King. Ah, you mustn't die, even to be King,' and she laid a hand on his shoulder.

'My Queen,' said he gently, 'in dreams, desires and fears blend in strange visions, so I seemed to you to be both a king and a dead man; but I'm not a king, and I am a very healthy fellow.'

Almost close on their talk about the dream came Colonel Sapt, saying that the Guards were in line, and all the women streaming out to watch them, followed by the men. The Constable bade Rudolf come by the back way to the stables and mount his horse.

'There's no time to lose,' said Sapt.

Rudolf walked towards the door. But a sound arrested his steps, and he waited in the middle of the room, his eyes on the door. Old Sapt flew to the threshold, his sword half-way out of its sheath. There was a step coming down the passage, and the feet stopped outside the door.

They waited: a low knock sounded on the door. Still for a moment they waited. The knock was repeated urgently.

'We must open,' said Sapt. 'Behind the curtain with you, Rudolf!'

The Queen sat down and Sapt piled a heap of papers before her, that it might seem as though he and she

transacted business. But his precautions were interrupted by a hoarse, eager, low cry from outside:

'Quick, quick!'

They knew the voice for Bernenstein's. The Queen sprang up, Rudolf came out, Sapt turned the key. The Lieutenant entered, hurried, breathless, pale.

'Well?' asked Sapt.

'Rischenheim has got away?' cried Rudolf, guessing in a moment the misfortune that had brought Bernenstein back.

'Yes, he's got away. Just as we left the town and reached the open road towards Tarlenheim he said, "Are we going to walk all the way?" I was not loth to go quicker, and we broke into a trot. But my horse stumbled, and I fell forward on his neck. I put out my arm to recover myself, and—I jerked my revolver on to the ground.'

'And he saw?'

'He saw, curse him! For a second he waited; then he smiled, and turned, and dug his spurs in and was off, straight across country towards Strelsau. Well, I was off my horse in a moment, and I fired three times after him.'

'You hit?' asked Rudolf.

'I think so. He shifted the reins from one hand to the other and wrung his arm. I mounted and made after him, but his horse was better than mine and he gained ground. So I left him and rode here to tell you. Never employ me again, Constable, as long as you live,' and the young man's face was twisted with misery and shame.

Rudolf went and laid a hand on his shoulder.

'It was an accident,' he said.

The Queen rose and walked towards him.

'Sir,' said she, 'it is not success but effort that should gain thanks.'

There was a moment's silence.

'Well, but what's to be done?' said Colonel Sapt. 'Rischenheim is gone to Strelsau.'

'You must be here?' asked Rudolf of the Constable. 'Well, I'll go to Strelsau, and I'll find Rupert, aye, and Rischenheim too, if they're in the city.'

'Take me with you,' cried Bernenstein eagerly.

The Constable shook his head.

'We want you here,' he said. 'Suppose Rupert comes here with Rischenheim!'

The idea was new, but the event by no means unlikely.

'Take me to the stables,' said Rudolf. 'And give me a good horse. I daren't take the train.'

'Come along,' said Sapt. 'Bernenstein, stay with the Queen.'

At the threshold Rudolf paused and, turning his head, glanced once at Queen Flavia, who stood still as a statue, watching him go. Then he followed the Constable, who brought him to the stables.

'Well, what are my orders?' he said.

'Ride round by the moat to the road at the back; you know your way after that. You mustn't reach Strelsau till it's dark. Then, if you want a shelter——'

'To Fritz von Tarlenheim's, yes! From there I shall go straight to Rupert's address.'

'Aye. And——Rudolf!'

'Yes?'

'Make an end of him this time.'

'I will do my best. But if he goes to the lodge? He will unless Rischenheim stops him.'

'I'll be there in case, but I think Rischenheim will stop him.'

'If he comes here?'

'Young Bernenstein will die before he allows him to reach the King.'

'Good-bye.'

'And good-luck.'

At a swift canter Rudolf darted round the drive that led from the stables, by the moat, to the old forest road behind. Thus he set out for the walls of Strelsau, through the forest of Zenda. And ahead of him, with an hour's start, galloped the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim, revenge in his heart.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MESSAGE OF SIMON THE HUNTSMAN

I RECEIVED the telegram sent to me by the Constable of Zenda at my own house in Strelsau about one o'clock. It is needless to say that I made immediate preparations to obey the summons. James, Mr. Rassendyll's servant, being informed of the message, was at my elbow with a card of the trains from Strelsau to Zenda, without waiting for any orders from me. We discovered that no train left till four o'clock, the result being that we could not arrive at the Castle till past six o'clock.

'You'd better see if you can get a special, my lord,' James suggested; 'I'll run on to the station and arrange about it.'

I agreed. Since I was known to be often employed in the King's service, I could take a special train without exciting remark. James set out, and about a quarter of an hour later I got into my carriage to drive to the station.

We had just entered the Königstrasse and were waiting impatiently for a heavy dray to move out of our path, when my coachman leant down from his box with an air of lively excitement.

'My lord,' he cried, 'there's Bauer—there, passing the butcher's shop!'

I sprang up in the carriage; the man's back was towards me, and he was threading his way through the people with a quick stealthy tread. I believe he must have seen me and was slinking off as fast as he could. I was not sure of him, but the coachman banished my doubt by saying: 'It's Bauer—it's certainly Bauer, my lord.'

I hardly stayed to form a resolution. If I could catch this fellow or even see where he went, a most important clue as to Rupert's doings and whereabouts might be put into my hand. I leapt out of the carriage, bidding the man wait, and at once started in pursuit of my former servant.

The numbers of the houses in the Königstrasse begin at the end adjoining the station. The street being a long one, I was, when I set out after Bauer, opposite number three hundred or thereabouts, and distant nearly three-quarters of a mile from that important number nineteen towards which Bauer was hurrying. I knew nothing and thought nothing of where he was going; I did not know of the telegram from '19 Königstrasse' which Sapt had compelled Rischenheim to read to him at Zenda; to me nineteen was no more than eighteen or twenty; my only desire was to overtake him.

After him I went; and he knew that I was after him. I saw him turn his face over his shoulder, and then bustle on faster. As we neared the end of the street and saw the station ahead of us, not more than twenty yards separated me from him. Then an annoying thing happened. I ran full into a stout old gentleman; when I disentangled myself, Bauer was gone! There was not a sign of him; I looked up: the number of the house above me was twenty-three, but the door was shut. I walked on a few paces, and up to nineteen. Nineteen was an old house, with a dirty dilapidated front. It was a shop where provisions of the cheaper sort were on view in the window. The shop door stood open, but there was nothing to connect Bauer with the house. I was about to pass on, when an old woman put her head out of the door and looked round. I was full in front of her. I am sure that the old woman started slightly, and I think

that I did. For I knew her, and she knew me. She was old Mother Holf, one of whose sons, Johann, had once betrayed to us the secret of the dungeon at Zenda, while the other had died by Mr. Rassendyll's hand.

'Ah, Mother Holf,' said I, 'how long is it since you set up shop in Strelsau?'

'About six months, my lord,' she answered.

'I have not come across you before,' said I, looking keenly at her.

'Such a poor little shop as mine would not be likely to secure your lordship's patronage,' she answered.

I looked up at the windows. They were all closed and had their wooden lattices shut. The house was devoid of any signs of life.

'You've a good house here, mother, though it wants a splash of paint,' said I. 'Do you live all alone in it?'

'Sometimes, sometimes not,' said she. 'I let lodgings to single men when I can.'

'Full now?'

'Not a soul, more's the pity, my lord.'

Then I shot an arrow at a venture.

'That man who came in just now, then, was he only a customer?'

'I wish a customer had come in, but there has been nobody,' she replied in surprised tones.

I looked full in her eyes; she met mine without flinching.

At this moment I saw James approaching hurriedly. He was looking up the street, no doubt seeking my carriage and chafing at its delay. An instant later he saw me.

'My lord,' he said, 'your train will be ready in five

minutes; if it doesn't start then, the line must be closed for another half-hour.'

I perceived a faint smile on the old woman's face. I was sure then that I was on the track of Bauer, and probably of more than Bauer. But my first duty was to obey orders and get to Zenda.

I turned away. But at this instant a loud merry laugh sounded from inside the house. The old woman's brow contracted in a frown, and her lips twitched for a moment; then her face regained its composure; but I knew the laugh, and she must have guessed that I knew it. Instantly I tried to appear as though I had noticed nothing. I nodded to her carelessly, and bidding James follow me, set out for the station. But as we reached the platform I laid my hand on his shoulder, saying:

'The Count of Hentzau is in that house, James.'

He looked at me without surprise; he was as hard to stir to wonder as old Sapt himself.

'Indeed, sir. Shall I stay and watch?'

'No, come with me,' I answered.

I arrived at the town of Zenda at half-past three, and was in the Castle before four. I may pass over the most kind and gracious words with which the Queen received me. Dismissed from her presence, I flew to Sapt: I found him in his room with Bernenstein, and had the satisfaction of learning that my news of Rupert's whereabouts was confirmed by his information. But my face grew long and apprehensive when I heard that Rudolf Rassendyll had gone alone to Strelsau to put his head in that lion's mouth in the Königstrasse.

'There will be three of them there—Rupert, Rischenheim, and my rascal Bauer,' said I.

'As to Rupert we don't know,' Sapt reminded me. 'He'll be there if Rischenheim arrives in time to tell him the truth about our telegram. But we have also to be ready for him here, and at the hunting-lodge. Well, we're ready for him wherever he is: Rudolf will be in Strelsau, you and I will ride to the lodge, and Bernenstein will be here with the Queen.'

Now, after all our stir and runnings to and fro, came an hour or two of peace. We employed the time in having a good meal, and it was past five when our repast was finished.

'The King should be back soon from his hunting,' said Sapt at last.

But six o'clock struck and the King did not appear. A few moments later a message came from the Queen, requesting our presence on the terrace in front of the Castle. The place commanded a view of the road by which the King would ride back, and we found the Queen walking restlessly up and down, considerably disquieted by the lateness of his return.

'It's strange that he doesn't come,' she murmured, shading her eyes with her hand, and looking along the road to where the dark masses of the forest trees bounded our view.

If the King's delay seemed strange at six, it was stranger at seven, and by eight most strange. We had long since ceased to talk lightly; by now we had lapsed into silence. Evening had fallen. We did not know what to do, nor even whether we ought to do anything.

At last my ear caught the sound of horses cantering on the road from the forest; at the same instant Bernenstein cried, 'Here they come!'. The Queen paused, and we gathered round her. The horse-hoofs came nearer.

Now we made out the figures of three men; they were the King's huntsmen, and they rode along merrily, singing a hunting chorus. The sound of it brought relief to us; so far at least there was no disaster. But why was not the King with them?

'The King is probably tired, and is following more slowly, madame,' suggested Bernenstein.

The King's chief huntsman, Simon, gorgeous in his uniform of green and gold, came swaggering along, and bowed low to the Queen.

'Well, Simon, where is the King?' she asked, trying to smile.

'The King, madame, has sent a message by me to your Majesty.'

'Pray deliver it to me, Simon.'

'I will, madame. The King has enjoyed fine sport; he was very tired; and as we chanced to kill a boar near the hunting-lodge—'

I do not know whether Simon noticed any change in the manner of his audience. But the Queen looked up with parted lips, and I believe that we three all drew a step nearer him.

'Yes, madame, the King was very tired, and as we chanced to kill near the hunting-lodge, the King bade us carry our quarry there, and come back to dress it to-morrow; so we obeyed, and here we are—that is, except Herbert, my brother, who stayed with the King by his Majesty's orders.'

'Stayed where with the King?' roared Sapt.

'Why, at the hunting-lodge, Constable. The King stays there to-night, and will ride back to-morrow morning with Herbert.'

He bowed to the Queen; she thanked him, and he withdrew.

After we were left alone there was a moment's silence. Then I said:

'Suppose Rupert gets our false telegram, and goes to the lodge!'

Sapt wasted no time.

'Bernenstein,' said he, 'you stay here as we arranged. Nothing is altered. Horses for Fritz and myself in five minutes.'

Bernenstein turned and shot like an arrow along the terrace towards the stables.

'Nothing is altered, madame,' said Sapt, 'except that we must be at the lodge before Count Rupert.'

I looked at my watch. It was twenty minutes past nine.

'You'll be in time?' asked the Queen, with clasped hands and frightened eyes.

'Assuredly, madame,' returned Sapt with a bow.

'You won't let him show the King my letter?'

'Why, no, madame,' said Sapt with a smile.

'Here are the horses,' I cried.

Then we mounted, and we started, and we rode, like the wind, for the hunting-lodge.

'Can we be in time?' said I.

'I think not, but we'll try,' said Colonel Sapt.

Suddenly there was a sound behind us of a horse at the gallop.

'We had best see what it is,' said the Constable, pulling up.

A second more, and the horseman was beside us. Sapt swore an oath half in amusement, half in vexation.

'Why, is it you, James?' I cried.

'Yes, sir,' answered Rudolf Rassendyll's servant.

'What do you want?' asked Sapt.

'I came to attend on the Count von Tarlenheim, sir.'

Then Sapt cried:

'What horse is that?'

'The best in the stables, so far as I could see, sir. I was afraid of not overtaking you.'

Sapt tugged at his moustache, scowled, but finally laughed.

'Much obliged for your compliment,' said he. 'The horse is mine.'

'Indeed, sir?' said James, with respectful interest.

For a moment we were all silent. Then Sapt laughed again.

'Forward!' said he, and the three of us dashed into the forest.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE TEMPER OF BORIS THE HOUND

LOOKING back now, in the light of the information I have gathered, I am able to trace very clearly the events of this day, and to understand how chance twisted and turned our plan to an issue, of which we were most guiltless in thought or intent. Had the King not gone to the hunting-lodge, our designs would have found the fulfilment we looked for; had Rischenheim succeeded in warning Rupert of our telegram we should have stood where we were. Fate or fortune would have it otherwise. The King, being weary, went to the lodge, and Rischenheim failed in warning his cousin. Indeed Rupert must have left the house in the Königstrasse almost immediately after I was safe away from the city. He was determined to be in good time for his appointment.

Accordingly he went to the station, and, travelling by the four o'clock train, reached Zenda about half-past five. Meanwhile Rischenheim arrived in Strelsau, found Rupert gone, and decided to await news of him before taking further action.

Of all this we, as we rode through the forest, knew nothing. Rischenheim and Rupert might have met or might have missed. We had to act as though they had missed and Rupert were gone to meet the King. But we were late. The knowledge of that pressed upon us, although we did not mention it again; it made us spur and drive our horses a little more quickly than safety allowed, and once or twice they stumbled. Sapt had taken the lead, and, sitting well down in the saddle, rode

ahead, sparing neither himself nor his beast. James and I were side by side behind him. We rode in silence.

Suddenly Sapt pointed in front of him. The lodge was before us. We all dismounted, tied our horses to trees and went forward at a quick silent walk. Our idea was that Sapt should enter on pretext of having been sent by the Queen to attend to her husband's comfort and arrange for his return without further fatigue next day.

Mr. Rassendyll's servant and I followed the Constable of Zenda up to the door. Here Sapt, who was in uniform, loosened his sword in its sheath; James and I looked to our revolvers. There were no lights visible in the lodge; the door was shut; everything was still. Sapt knocked softly with his knuckles, but there was no answer from within. He laid hold of the handle and turned it; the door opened, and the passage lay dark and apparently empty before us.

'You stay here, as we arranged,' whispered the Colonel. 'Give me the matches, and I'll go in.'

James handed him a box of matches, and he crossed the threshold. For a yard or two we saw him plainly, then his figure grew dim and indistinct. But in a moment there was a muffled exclamation, and the noise of a man stumbling, a sword, too, clattered on the stones of the passage. Then came the sharp little explosion of a match struck on its box, next we heard Sapt raising himself, his scabbard scraping along the stones; his footsteps came towards us, and in a second he appeared at the door.

'What was it?' I whispered.

'I fell,' said Sapt.

'Over what?'

'Come and see.'

I followed the Constable for the distance of eight or ten feet along the passage.

He struck a match, and I saw a dark body lying across the passage.

'It's Boris, the boar-hound,' said I, in a whisper, although there was no sign of any listeners.

I knew the dog well; he was the King's favourite, and always accompanied him when he went hunting. Sapt put his hand on the beast's head. There was a bullet-hole right through his forehead. I nodded, and in my turn pointed to the dog's right shoulder, which had been shattered by another ball.

'Now come along,' said the Constable, and he stepped over the body of the boar-hound, and I followed him.

At this moment we heard from the passage on our left a low moan, and then a dragging sound, as if a man were crawling along the floor, painfully trailing his limbs after him. Sapt had found a lamp, and by its light we saw Herbert the forester, pale-faced and wide-eyed, raised from the ground on his two hands, while his legs stretched behind him and his stomach rested on the boards.

'Who is it?' he said in a faint voice.

'Why, man, you know us,' said the Constable, stepping up to him. 'What's happened here?'

The poor fellow was very faint, and, I think, wandered a little in his brain.

'I've got it, sir,' he murmured, 'I've got it, fair and straight. No more hunting for me, sir.' He let his head fall with a thud on the floor.

I ran and raised him. Kneeling on one knee, I propped his head against my leg.

'Tell us about it,' commanded Sapt in a curt crisp

voice, while I got the man into t
that I could contrive.

In slow struggling tones he began
King had eaten a little supper, and, h
bedroom, had stretched himself on the
asleep without undressing. Herbert w
dining-table when suddenly he found a
beside him. He did not know who the r
was, but he was of middle height, d
He was dressed in a shooting-tunic
thrust through the belt of it. One
belt, while the other held a small s

'Tell the King I am here. H
the stranger.

Herbert, alarmed at the sudden
approach, drew back. He was u
stout fellow, was prepared to defe
he could. Influenced by the visitor
began to retreat towards the bedroo
towards Rupert, for Rupert it was.
more, tell him I have the packet a
Rupert. The man bowed and passed
The King was asleep; when roused h
nothing of letter or packet, and to e
Herbert's fears revived; he whispere
carried a revolver. The King was no c
from his bed; at the same moment the
uncoiled himself and came from bene
fawning. But in an instant the beast
a stranger: his ears pricked and he ga
he looked up in his master's face.
Hentzau, weary perhaps of waiting,
doorway.

The King was unarmed, and Herbe

I followed the C ; weapons were in the adjoining room,
ten feet along the l to bar the way.
He struck a mat me, sire ?' said Rupert with a bow.
the passage. d the King. Then he said angrily,
'It's Boris, ome here ?'
although there expect me ?' cried Rupert, and in an
I knew the ug ught of a trap seemed to flash across his
and always accon 'he revolver half-way from his belt.
Sapt put his hand on n Herbert flung himself before the
hole right through his on the bed. Rupert, puzzled, vexed,
pointed to the dog's k a step forward, crying out some-
shattered by another b im. 'Keep back!' exclaimed the
'Now come along Rupert paused; then as though
stepped over the body c he held up the box that was in his
him.

At this moment we sire, and we'll talk afterwards,'
left a low moan, and is hand with the box in it.
man were crawling al d to Herbert:
limbs after him. S and take it.'
light we saw Herbe itated, fearing to leave the King,
eyed, raised from w protected as though with a shield.
his legs stretched b e overcame him: if there were a trap,
the boards. delay doubled his danger. With a

'Who is it?' he s exclaimed:
'Why, man, yo if you're afraid to come for it,' and
stepping up to him. t to Herbert or the King, or which of
to catch it.

The poor fellow w ad a strange result. In an instant,
a little in his brain. and a mighty bound, Boris was at the
'I've got it, sir,' Rupert had not seen or had not heeded
straight. No more led oath rang out from him. He
head fall with a thud olver from his belt and fired at
I ran and rai his shot must have broken the beast's
propped his head only half arrested his spring. His great
'Tell us about



'WITH A FIERCE GROWL AND MIGHTY BOUND BORIS WAS AT THE STRANGER'S THROAT'

weight was still hurled on Rupert's chest, and bore him back on his knee. The packet that he had flung lay unheeded. The King, furious with anger at his favourite's fate, jumped up and ran past Rupert into the next room. Herbert followed; even as they went Rupert flung the wounded beast from him and darted to the doorway. He found himself facing Herbert, who held a boar-spear, and the King, who had a double-barrelled hunting gun. He raised his left hand, Herbert said—no doubt he still asked a hearing—but the King levelled his weapon. With a spring Rupert gained the shelter of the door, the bullet sped by him and buried itself in the wall of the room. Then Herbert was at him with the boar-spear. Without hesitation Rupert fired at Herbert, bringing him to the ground with a mortal wound. The King's gun was at his shoulder again.

'You fool!' roared Rupert, 'if you must have it, take it,' and gun and revolver rang out at the same moment. But Rupert hit, the King missed; Herbert saw the Count stand for an instant with his smoking barrel in his hand, looking at the King who lay on the ground. Then Rupert walked towards the door. I wish I had seen his face then! Did he frown or smile? Was triumph or chagrin uppermost?

He reached the door and passed through. That was the last Herbert saw of him; but the fourth actor in the drama took the stage. Limping along, now whining in sharp agony, now growling in fierce anger, the hound Boris dragged himself across the room, through the door, after Rupert of Hentzau. There was a growl, an oath, the sound of a scuffle. Rupert must have turned in time to receive the dog's spring. There came another shot, a laugh, retreating steps, and a door slammed. With that last sound Herbert awoke to the fact of the Count's escape.

I had listened to the story, bound as though by a spell. I looked at Sapt. He was pale as a ghost, and the lines on his face seemed to have grown deeper. He glanced up and met my regard. Neither of us spoke; we exchanged thoughts with our eyes. 'This is our work,' we said to one another. 'It was our trap—these are our victims.' I cannot even now think of that hour, for by our act the King lay dead.

But was he dead? I seized Sapt by the arm.

'The King?' I whispered hoarsely.

'Yes, the King,' he returned.

Facing round, we walked to the door of the dining-room and pushed it wide open. James had the lamp now, and followed us with it. But the King was not there. A sudden hope filled me. He had not been killed then! I darted across towards the inside room. Sapt and James came together, and stood peering over my shoulder in the doorway.

The King lay prone on the floor, face downwards, near the bed. He had crawled there, seeking for some place to rest, as we supposed. He did not move. We watched him for a moment; the silence seemed deeper than silence could be. At last, moved by a common impulse, we stepped forward, but timidly, as though we approached the throne of Death itself. I was the first to kneel by the King and raise his head. He was dead.

I felt Sapt's hand on my shoulder. Looking up, I saw his other hand stretched out towards the ground. I turned my eyes where he pointed. There, in the King's hand, stained with the King's blood, was the box that I had carried to Wintenberg and Rupert of Hentzau had brought to the lodge that night. It was not rest, but the box, that the dying King had sought in his last moment.

I bent, and lifting his hand unclasped the fingers, still limp and warm.

Sapt bent down with sudden eagerness.

'Is it open?' he whispered.

The string was round it; the sealing wax was unbroken. The secret had outlived the King, and he had gone to his death unknowing.

# CHAPTER IX

## THE KING IN THE HUNTING-LODGE

THE moment with its shock and tumult of feeling brings one judgment, later reflection another. I cannot tell fully what the others felt, but in me at least the dominant impulse was to waste not a moment in proclaiming the crime, and raising the whole country in pursuit of Rupert. I remember that I walked over to where Sapt was and caught him by the arm, saying:

'We must raise the alarm. If you'll go to Zenda, I'll start for Strelsau.'

'The alarm?' said he, looking up at me and tugging his moustache.

'Yes: when the news is known, every man in the kingdom will be on the look-out for him, and he can't escape.'

'So that he'd be taken?' asked the Constable.

'Yes, to a certainty!' I cried, hot in excitement and emotion.

'Yes, he'd probably be taken or killed,' said Sapt.

'Then let's do it!' I cried.

'With the Queen's letter on him,' said Sapt.

I had forgotten.

'We have the box, he has the letter still,' said Sapt.

I could have laughed even at that moment. He had left the box, but the letter was on him. Taken alive, he would use that powerful weapon to save his life or satisfy his anger; if it were found on his body, its evidence would speak loud and clear to all the world. We desired his death, but we must be his bodyguard and

die in his defence rather than let any other but ourselves come at him. All this rushed to my mind at Sapt's words, but what to do I could not see. For the King of Ruritania lay dead.

An hour or more had passed since our discovery, and it was now close on midnight. Had all gone well we ought by this time to have been far on our road back to the Castle; by this time Rupert must be miles away from where he had killed the King; already Mr. Rassendyll would be seeking his enemy in Strelsau.

'But what are we to do about—about that, then?' I asked, pointing with my finger through the doorway towards the King's body.

Sapt gave a tug at his moustache, then crossed his hands on the hilt of his sword between his knees and leant forward in his chair.

'Nothing,' he said, looking in my face. 'Until we have the letter, nothing.'

'But it's impossible,' I cried.

'Why, no, Fritz,' he answered thoughtfully. 'It's not impossible yet; it may become so. But if we can catch Rupert in the next day, or even in the next two days, it's not impossible. Only let me have that letter, and I'll account for the concealment.'

'You'll be able to make a story, sir,' James said, with a grave but reassuring air.

'Yes, James, I shall be able to make a story, or your master will make one for me. But story or no story, the letter mustn't be found.'

We drew nearer together; Sapt and I sat, while James leant over Sapt's chair.

The oil in the lamp was almost exhausted, and the light burned very dim. Now and again poor Herbert, for whom our skill could do nothing, gave a low

moan. Except for this, our voices alone broke the silence of the little lodge.

'The Queen must know,' said Sapt. 'Let her stay at Zenda and give out that the King is at the lodge for a day or two longer. Then you, Fritz, and Bernenstein must get to Strelsau as quick as you can, and find Rudolf Rassendyll. You three ought to be able to track young Rupert down and get the letter from him.'

'And you?'

'James and I stay here. If any one comes whom we can keep out, the King is ill. If rumours get about, and great folk come, why, they must enter.'

'But the body?'

'This morning, when you're gone, we shall make a temporary grave. I daresay two,' and he jerked his thumb towards poor Herbert. 'Or even,' he added with his grim smile, 'three—for our friend Boris, too, must be out of sight.'

So the plan was made. A grave was to be dug ready for the King; if need arose, his body should be laid in it, and the place chosen was under the floor of the wine-cellar. When death came to poor Herbert, he could lie in the yard behind the house; for Boris they meditated a resting-place under the tree where our horses were tethered. There was nothing to keep me, and I rose; but as I rose, I heard the forester's voice call plaintively for me. The unlucky fellow knew me well, and now cried to me to sit by him. He was very near his end, and, sitting by him, I did my best to soothe his passing. But thus time went, and it was nearly five in the morning before I closed the sufferer's eyes, bade my companions farewell, and mounted my horse. They took theirs and led them away to the stables behind the lodge; I waved my hand and galloped off on my return to the

Castle. Day was dawning, and the air was fresh and pure. The new light brought new hope; fears seemed to vanish before it; my nerves were strung to effort and to confidence. My horse moved freely under me and carried me easily along the grassy avenues.

The Castle came in sight, and I hailed it with a glad cry that echoed among the trees. But a moment later I gave an exclamation of surprise, and raised myself a little from the saddle while I gazed earnestly at the summit of the tower. The flag-staff was naked; the royal standard that had flapped in the wind last night was gone. But by immemorial custom the flag flew when the King or the Queen was at the Castle. It would fly for Rudolf V no more; but why did it not proclaim and honour the presence of Queen Flavia? I sat down in my saddle and spurred my horse to the top of his speed.

In a quarter of an hour more I was at the door. A servant ran out, and I dismounted leisurely. Pulling off my gloves, I dusted my boots with them, turned to the stableman and bade him look to the horse, and then said to the footman:

'As soon as the Queen is dressed, find out if she can see me. I have a message from his Majesty.'

The fellow looked a little puzzled; but at this moment Hermann, the King's butler, came to the door.

'Isn't the Constable with you, my lord?' he asked.

'No, the Constable remains at the lodge with the King,' said I carelessly, though I was very far from careless. 'I have a message for her Majesty, Hermann.'

'The Queen's not here,' said he. 'Indeed we've had a lively time, my lord. At five o'clock she came out, ready dressed, from her room, sent for Lieutenant von Bernenstein, and announced that she was about to set out from the Castle. As you know, the mail train passes here at six.'

'Where for?' I asked.

'Why, for Strelsau. She gave no reasons for going, and took with her only one lady, Lieutenant von Bernenstein being in attendance.'

This was another blow to our plans, but it was plain to me that I also must go to Strelsau. There, in the city, the drama must be played out. There was Rudolf, there Rischenheim, there in all likelihood Rupert of Hentzau, there now the Queen. And of these Rupert alone, or perhaps Rischenheim also, knew that the King was dead. To Strelsau I must go, to tell the Queen that she was widowed, and to aim the stroke at young Rupert's heart.

At nine in the morning I started. I was bound to ride to the station, and there wait for a train which would carry me to the capital. From the station I could send a message; but the message must announce only my own coming, not the news I carried. To Sapt, thanks to the cypher, I could send word at any time.

By ten o'clock I was at the station, for I rode furiously. From there I sent to Bernenstein, at the Palace in Strelsau, word of my coming.

At last I was in the train. An hour's run brought me in sight of Strelsau. Now we entered the station. With a great effort I calmed myself. I lolled back in my seat; when we stopped I sat there till a porter opened the door. I bade him get me a cab, and followed him across the station. He held the door for me, and I set my foot on the step.

'Tell him to drive to the Palace,' said I, 'and to be quick.'

I jumped in. But at this moment I saw a man on the platform beckoning with his hand and hastening towards me. Anton von Strofzin, my wife's cousin, came up, holding out his hand.

'Ah, my dear Fritz!' said he. 'I thought you were settled at Zenda for a month?'

'The Queen changed her mind suddenly,' said I, smiling.

'Well, I thought you'd be here soon,' he said; 'but I didn't know that the Queen had come.'

'You didn't? Then why did you look out for me?'

He opened his eyes a little in languid surprise.

'Oh, I supposed you'd be on duty and have to come. Aren't you in attendance on the King?'

'Why, yes,' said I. 'At least, I'm engaged now on the King's business.'

'Precisely,' said he. 'So I thought you'd come, as soon as I heard that the King was here.'

'The King here?' I gasped, clutching him by the arm.

'Of course. You didn't know? Yes, he's in town.'

But I heeded him no more. For a moment I could not speak, then I cried to the cabman:

'To the Palace. And drive like the wind!'

I sank back on the cushions, fairly aghast. The King lay dead in the hunting-lodge, but the King was in his capital!

Of course the truth soon flashed through my mind, but it brought no comfort. Rudolf Rassendyll was in Strelsau. He had been seen by somebody and taken for the King. But comfort! What comfort was there, now that the King was dead and could never come to the rescue of his counterfeit?

# CHAPTER X

## THE KING IN STRELSAU

Mr. Rassendyll reached Strelsau from Zenda without accident about nine o'clock in the evening of the same day as that which witnessed the tragedy of the hunting-lodge. Fortunately the night, fine where we were, was wet and stormy at Strelsau; thus there were few people in the streets, and he was able to gain the door of my house still unremarked. Here, of course, a danger presented itself. None of my servants were in the secret; only my wife, in whom the Queen herself had confided, knew Rudolf, and she did not expect to see him, since she was ignorant of the recent course of events.

Rudolf drew rein before my door, and, having dismounted, rang the bell. When the butler came, a strange hoarse voice asked for the Countess. The man hesitated, as well he might, to leave the stranger alone with the door open. Murmuring an apology, he shut the door and went in search of his mistress. His description of the untimely caller at once roused my wife's quick wit. She laid aside her embroidery most composedly.

'Ah, yes,' she said, 'I know the gentleman. Surely you haven't left him out in the rain?'

The butler stammered an apology. Helga cut him short with an impatient gesture, crying, 'How stupid of you!' and herself ran quickly down and opened the door. The first sight of Mr. Rassendyll confirmed her suspicions; in a moment, she said, she knew his eyes.

'It is you, then?' she cried. 'And my foolish servant has left you in the rain! Pray come in. Oh, but your horse!' She turned to the penitent butler, who had followed her downstairs. 'Take the Baron's horse round to the stables,' she said.

Reluctantly the fellow stepped out into the storm. Rudolf entered and Helga led him swiftly into a small sitting-room on the ground floor. Rudolf turned to her with a smile, and, bowing, kissed her hand.

'The Baron what, my dear Countess?' he inquired.

'He won't ask,' said she, with a shrug. 'Do tell me what brings you here, and what has happened.'

He told her very briefly all he knew.

'Can I get out of the house and, if need be, back again unnoticed?' he asked.

'The door is locked at night, and only Fritz and the butler have keys.'

Mr. Rassendyll's eye travelled to the window of the room.

'I haven't grown so fat that I can't get through there,' said he.

'I will sit here all night and keep everybody from the room.'

'Then I may issue my orders?' he asked, smiling.

'They shall be obeyed.'

'Then a dry cloak, and a little supper.'

My wife took him to my dressing-room, where he got dry clothes; then she saw the supper laid, ordered a bedroom to be prepared, told the butler that she had business with the Baron and that he need not sit up if she were later than eleven, dismissed him, and went to tell Rudolf that the coast was clear for his return to the sitting-room.

He made a hasty supper; then they talked together,

Rudolf smoking his cigar. As the clock struck twelve Rudolf rose and turned the lamp very low. Then he unfastened the shutters noiselessly, raised the window and looked out.

'Shut them again when I'm gone,' he whispered. 'If I come back I'll knock like this, and you'll open for me.'

The storm was as fierce as ever, and the street was deserted. He let himself down on to the pavement, his face wrapped up.

Both to my wife and to Rudolf himself the street had seemed empty of any living being when he set out. Yet from the shadow of a projecting wall a man had watched all that passed.

The night was so dark that the spy did not recognise who the visitor was; but he rightly conceived that he would serve his employer by tracking the steps of the tall man who made so mysterious an arrival and so surreptitious a departure from a suspected house. Accordingly, as Rudolf turned the corner, a short thick-set figure started cautiously out of the shadow, and followed in Rudolf's wake through the storm.

As Rudolf turned into the Königstrasse, Bauer (for he was the spy) quickened his pace and reduced the interval between them to about seventy yards. This he might well have thought a safe distance on a night so wild, when the rush of the wind and the pelt of the rain joined to hide the sound of footsteps.

But Bauer reasoned as a townsman, and Rudolf Rassendyll had the quick ear of a man bred in the country and trained to the woodland. All at once there was a jerk of his head; a motion which always marked awakened attention in him. He did not pause nor break his stride: to do either would have been to betray his

suspicions to his follower; but he crossed the road to the opposite side to that where No. 19 was situated, and slackened his pace a little. The steps behind him grew slower, even as his did; their sound came no nearer: the follower would not overtake.

Then an idea seized him, and he came to a sudden stop on the pavement, engrossed in deep thought. Was the man who dogged his steps Rupert himself? Mr. Rassendyll asked no better than to meet his enemy thus in the open. They could fight a fair fight; if he got the better of Rupert, the letter would be his; a moment would suffice to destroy it and give safety to the Queen. He turned full round and began to walk straight towards Bauer, his hand resting on the revolver in the pocket of his coat.

Bauer saw him coming, and must have known that he was suspected. At once the cunning fellow slouched his head between his shoulders, and set out along the street at a quick shuffle, whistling as he went. Rudolf stood still now in the middle of the road, wondering who the man was. On came Bauer, softly whistling and slushing his feet carelessly through the liquid mud. Now he was nearly opposite where Mr. Rassendyll stood. Rudolf walked suddenly across to him, and spoke to him in his natural voice, at the same time removing the scarf partly, but not altogether, from his face:

'You're out late, my friend, for a night like this.'

Bauer, startled though he was by the unexpected challenge, had his wits about him. Whether he identified Rudolf at once I do not know.

'A lad that has no home to go to must needs be out both late and early, sir,' said he.

I had described Bauer very minutely to Mr. Rassendyll; he recognized him now.

'No home to go to!' cried Rudolf in a pitying tone. 'Come with me, and I'll find you good shelter, my boy,' and passing his left arm through Bauer's right he led him across the road.

Bauer was without any weapon, and he was a child in Rudolf's grasp. He had no alternative but to obey Mr. Rassendyll, and they two began to walk down the Königstrasse.

Soon they came to the small numbers at the station end of the street. Rudolf began to peer at the shop fronts.

'It's very dark,' said he. 'Pray, lad, can you make out which is nineteen?'

The moment he had spoken the smile broadened on his face. The shot had gone home. Bauer was a clever scoundrel, but his nerves were not under perfect control, and his arm had quivered under Rudolf's.

'Nineteen, sir?' he stammered.

'Ah, this looks like it,' said Rudolf in a tone of great satisfaction, as they came to old Mother Holf's little shop. 'Isn't that a one and a nine over the door, my lad? Pray ring the bell. My hands are occupied.'

Rudolf's hands were indeed occupied: one held Bauer's arm with a grip of iron, in the other the captive saw the revolver, which had till now lain hidden.

'You see?' asked Rudolf pleasantly. 'You must ring for me, mustn't you?'

'There's no bell,' said Bauer sullenly.

'Ah, then you knock?'

'I suppose so.'

'In any particular way, my friend?'

'I don't know,' growled Bauer.

'Nor I. Can't you guess?'

'No, I know nothing of it.'

'Well, we must try. You knock, and——Listen, my lad. You must guess right. You understand?'

Bauer saw the revolver pointing at him and yielded. He lifted his hand and knocked on the door with his knuckles, first loudly, then very softly, the gentler stroke being repeated five times in rapid succession. Clearly he was expected, for without any sound of approaching feet the chain was unfastened. Then came the noise of the bolt being cautiously worked back into its socket. As it shot home a chink of the door opened. At the same moment Rudolf's hand slipped from Bauer's arm. With a swift movement he caught the fellow by the nape of the neck and flung him violently into the roadway.

Rudolf threw himself against the door: it yielded, he was inside, and in an instant he had shut the door and driven the bolt home again, leaving Bauer in the gutter outside. Then he turned with his hand on the butt of his revolver. I know that he hoped to find Rupert of Hentzau's face within a foot of his.

Neither Rupert nor Rischenheim, nor even the old woman, fronted him: a tall, handsome dark girl faced him, holding an oil lamp in her hand. He did not know her, but I could have told him that she was old Mother Holf's youngest child, Rosa.

The lamp shook and almost fell from her hand when she saw him; for the scarf had slid away, and his features were exposed to full view. Fright, delight, and excitement vied with one another in her eyes.

'The King!' she whispered in amazement. 'I should know you anywhere, your Majesty.'

'Then you'll help me perhaps?'

'With my life!'

'No, no, my dear young lady, merely with a little information. Whose house is this?'

'My mother's.'

'Ah! She takes lodgers?'

'Yes,' she said simply.

'Then who's here?'

'My lord the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim.'

'And what's he doing?'

'He's lying on the bed moaning and swearing because his wounded arm gives him pain.'

'And is nobody else here?'

'You mean Count Rupert? No, he's gone; but he's gone to find you.'

'To find me? How do you know that, my pretty lady?'

'Bauer told me.'

'Well, and where has this foolish Count gone to meet me?' asked Rudolf lightly.

'You haven't seen him?'

'No; I come straight from the Castle of Zenda.'

'But,' she cried, 'he expected to find you at the hunting-lodge. Ah, but now I recollect! The Count of Rischenheim was greatly vexed to find, on his return, that his cousin was gone.'

'Ah, he was gone! Now I see! Rischenheim brought a message from me to Count Rupert.'

'And they missed one another, your Majesty?'

'Exactly, my dear young lady. Very vexatious it is, upon my word!' In this remark, at least, Rudolf spoke no more than he felt. 'But when do you expect the Count of Hentzau?' he pursued.

'Early in the morning, your Majesty—at seven or eight.'

'Will you be ready to open to me when I come at eleven and knock as Bauer knocked?'

'Yes, I'll be there.'

'And tell nobody that I've been here to-night? Will you promise me that?'

'I'll do all you tell me. But—but Bauer knows.

'True,' said Rudolf, 'Bauer knows. Well, if Bauer comes, you have told me nothing. Mind, nothing! I threatened you, but you told me nothing.'

'He'll tell them you have been here.'

'That can't be helped; at least they won't know when I shall arrive again. Good-night.'

Rudolf opened the door and slipped through, closing it hastily behind him. If Bauer got back to the house, his visit must be known; but if he could intercept Bauer, the girl's silence was assured. He stood just outside, listening intently and searching the darkness with eager eyes.

## CHAPTER XI

### WHAT THE CHANCELLOR'S WIFE SAW

THE night was waning fast; soon the streets would become alive and people be about. Before then Rudolf Rassendyll must be under cover; else men would say that the King was in Strelsau, and the news would flash in a few hours through the kingdom and (so Rudolf feared) reach even those ears which we knew to be shut to all earthly sounds. But there was still some time at Mr. Rassendyll's disposal, and he could not spend it better than in pursuing his fight with Bauer. He drew himself back into the shadow of house walls and prepared to wait.

Minutes went by; there were no signs of Bauer nor of anybody else in the silent street. Rudolf turned his head this way and that, seeking always the darker blot of shadow that would mean a human being. For a while his search was in vain, but presently he found what he looked for. On the same side of the street, from the direction of the station, three blurred shapes moved up the street. They came stealthily, yet quickly. Rudolf, scenting danger, flattened himself close against the wall and felt for his revolver. By very gradual sidelong motions he moved a few paces from the door of Mother Holf's house, and stood some six or eight feet on the right hand side of it. The three men came on. He strained his eyes in the effort to discern there features. In that dim light certainty was impossible, but the one in the middle might well be Bauer. If it were Bauer, then Bauer had friends with him, and seemed to be

looking for some one. Always most carefully and gradually, Rudolf edged yet farther from the shop. At a distance of five yards he halted finally, drew out his revolver, covered the man whom he took to be Bauer, and thus waited his fortune and his chance.

Now it was plain that Bauer—for Bauer it was—would look for one of two things: what he hoped was to find Rudolf still in the house, what he feared was to be told that Rudolf was gone whole and sound. If the latter tidings met him, these two good friends of his were to have five crowns each and go home in peace; if the former, they were to murder Rudolf and make ten crowns.

'Here's the house,' whispered Bauer, stopping at the door. 'Now I'll knock, and you stand by to knock him on the head if he runs out. He's got a six-shooter, so lose no time. Are you ready?'

A ruffian stood on either side of the door with uplifted bludgeon. Bauer raised his hand to knock.

Before Bauer had time to give the signal, Rudolf sprang out suddenly from the wall and darted at the fellow. His onset was so sudden that the other two fell back a pace; he caught Bauer fairly by the throat. Bauer instantly raised his hand and thrust fiercely at Rudolf with the long knife that he carried. Mr. Rassendyll would have been a dead man, had he not loosed his hold and sprung lightly away. But Bauer sprang at him again, thrusting with his knife, and crying to his associates, 'Club him, you fools, club him!'

Thus exhorted, one jumped forward. The moment for hesitation was gone. In spite of the noise of wind and rain, the sound of a shot risked much; but not to fire was death. Rudolf fired full at Bauer: the fellow saw his intention and tried to leap behind one of his

companions; he was just too late, and fell with a groan to the ground.

The other ruffians shrank back, appalled by the sudden act. Mr. Rassendyll laughed. A half-smothered oath broke from one of them. 'The King!' he whispered hoarsely, gazing at Rudolf's face and letting his arm fall to his side. Again Rudolf laughed at his terrified stare.

'Take up that fellow by his head and his heels,' ordered Rudolf. 'Quickly! I suppose you don't want the police to find us here with him, do you? Well, no more do I. Lift him up.'

At this moment there came a groan from Bauer; his leap aside had served him well, and the bullet had just glanced on his temple, stunning, but not killing him. Rudolf considered for a moment; but in an instant his thoughts were scattered.

'The patrol, the patrol!' hoarsely whispered the fellow who had not yet spoken. There was a sound of the hoofs of horses. Down the street from the station-end there appeared two mounted men. Without a second's hesitation the two rascals bolted, one running at his full speed across the street, the other no less quickly up the Königstrasse.

In an instant Rudolf also took to his heels up the Königstrasse. But before he had gone very far, coming to a narrow turning, he shot down it; then he paused for a moment to listen.

The patrol had seen the sudden dispersal of the group, and, struck with natural suspicion, quickened pace. A few minutes brought them where Bauer was. They jumped from their horses and ran to him. He was unconscious, and could, of course, give them no account of how he came to be in his present state. They were

perplexed; they were but two; there was a wounded man to look after; there were three men to pursue, and the three had fled in three different directions. They looked up at No. 19; No. 19 remained dark, quiet, absolutely indifferent. The fugitives were out of sight.

Rudolf Rassendyll, hearing nothing, started again on his way. He lost no time now in turning his steps towards his refuge. It was past five o'clock, day came quickly, and the streets began to be peopled by men and women on their way to market.

He gained the comparative seclusion of the street in which my house stands and was almost in safety; but bad luck was now to have its turn. When Mr. Rassendyll was no more than fifty yards from my door, a carriage suddenly drove up and stopped a few paces in front of him. The footman sprang down and opened the door. Two ladies got out; they were dressed in evening costume, and were returning from a ball. One was middle-aged, the other young and pretty. They stood for a moment on the pavement, the younger saying: 'Isn't it pleasant, mother? I wish I could always be up at five o'clock.'

'My dear, you wouldn't like it for long,' answered the elder. 'It's very nice for a change, but——'

She stopped abruptly. Her eye had fallen on Rudolf Rassendyll. He knew her: she was no less a person than the wife of Helsing the Chancellor; his was the house at which the carriage had stopped.

'Good gracious!' she whispered loudly, and, catching her daughter's arm, she murmured: 'Heavens, my dear, it's the King!'

Rudolf was caught. Not only the ladies but their servants were looking at him.

Flight was impossible. He walked by them. The

ladies curtseyed, the servants bowed bareheaded. Rudolf touched his hat and bowed slightly in return.

He reached my house and turning his head over his shoulder, saw that the Baroness and her daughters had retreated to the cover of the porch; but their eager faces still peered from between the pillars that supported it.

'I may as well go in now,' said Rudolf, and in he went. There was a merry smile on his face as he ran forward to meet Helga, who had been looking out of the window and had seen the encounter.

'They saw you?' she gasped.

'Undoubtedly,' said he. Then his sense of amusement conquered everything else, and he sat down in a chair, laughing.

'I'd give my life,' said he, 'to hear the story that the Chancellor will be waked up to hear in a minute or two from now!'

But a moment's thought made him grave again.

'You must rouse one of the servants at once,' he said quickly. 'Send him round to the Chancellor's and tell the Chancellor to come here directly. No, write a note. Say the King has come by appointment to see Fritz on private business, but that Fritz has not kept the appointment, and that the King must now see the Chancellor at once.'

She was looking at him with wondering eyes.

'Don't you see,' he said, 'if I can impose on Helsing, I may stop those women's tongues? If nothing's done, how long do you suppose it'll be before all Strelsau knows that the King is here?'

'I'll do it,' she said, and sat down to write.

Thus it was that, hard on the tidings which the Baroness von Helsing poured into her husband's drowsy

ears, came an imperative summons that the Chancellor should wait on the King at the house of Fritz von Tarlenheim.

Truly we had tempted fate too far by bringing Rudolf Rassendyll again to Strelsau.

## CHAPTER XII

### BEFORE THEM ALL!

GREAT as was the risk created by the course which Mr. Rassendyll adopted, I cannot doubt that he acted for the best in the light of the information which he possessed. His plan was to disclose himself to Helsing in the character of the King, to bind him to secrecy, and make him impose the same obligation on his wife, daughter and servants. The Chancellor was to be quieted with the excuse of urgent business, and conciliated by a promise that he should know its nature in the course of a few hours; meanwhile, an appeal to his loyalty must suffice to ensure obedience.

If all went well in the day that had now dawned, by the evening of it the letter would be destroyed, the Queen's peril past, and Rudolf once more far away from Strelsau. The old Chancellor was a very good fellow, and I do not think that Rudolf did wrong in relying upon him. Where he miscalculated was, of course, just where he was ignorant. The whole of what the Queen's friends did in Strelsau became useless by reason of the King's death.

The Chancellor himself showed much good sense. Even before he obeyed the King's summons he sent for the two servants and charged them, on pain of instant dismissal, to say nothing of what they had seen. His commands to his wife and daughter were more polite but no less peremptory. He may well have supposed that the King's business was private as well as important

when it led his Majesty to be roaming the streets of Strelsau at a moment when he was supposed to be at the Castle of Zenda. So the Chancellor, having given his orders, and being himself aflame with the liveliest curiosity, lost no time in obeying the King's commands, and arrived at my house before six o'clock.

When the visitor was announced Rudolf was upstairs, having some breakfast. Helga had learnt her lesson well enough to entertain the visitor until Rudolf appeared. She was full of apologies for my absence, protesting that she could in no way explain it; neither could she so much as conjecture what was the King's business with her husband.

'I know no more,' she said, 'than that Fritz wrote to me to expect the King and him at about five o'clock.'

The King came and greeted Helsing most graciously. The tragedy and comedy of those busy days were strangely mingled; even now I can hardly help smiling when I picture Rudolf, with grave lips but that distant twinkle in his eye, sitting down by the old Chancellor in the darkest corner of the room, covering him with flattery, deploring a secret obstacle to immediate confidence, appealing to his loyalty to trust him. Helsing, blinking through his spectacles, followed with devout attention the long narrative that told nothing. His accents were almost broken with emotion as he put himself absolutely at the King's disposal.

But while these things passed at my house, the Queen and Bernenstein were on their way to Strelsau. Her sudden resolve to leave Zenda had been the result of her terrible anxiety. As they journeyed her talk was all of Rudolf's peril, never of the disaster which threatened herself, and which we were all striving with might and

main to avert from her head. Her dream had filled her with such fears for him that she expected even then to find him dead, knowing that he had gone to fight with the Count of Hentzau; and until she knew that he was alive she could not rest. Bernenstein declared, with a confidence which he did not feel, that beyond doubt Mr. Rassendyll was alive and well.

'But where—where?' she cried eagerly.

'We're most likely, madame, to find him at Fritz Von Tarlenheim's,' answered the lieutenant.

'Then let us drive there at once,' she urged.

Bernenstein, however, persuaded her to go to the palace first and let it be known that she was going to pay a visit to my wife. She arrived at the palace at eight o'clock, took a cup of chocolate, and then ordered her carriage. Bernenstein alone accompanied her when she set out for my house about nine. He was, by now, hardly less excited than the Queen herself.

Thus, then, a little after nine in the morning, the Queen's carriage drove up to my door. The ladies of the Chancellor's family had enjoyed a very short night's rest, for their heads came bobbing out of window the moment the wheels were heard. Many people were about now, and the royal carriage attracted the usual small crowd of loiterers. Bernenstein sprang out and gave his hand to the Queen. With a hasty slight bow to the onlookers she hastened up the two or three steps of the porch, and with her own hand rang the bell. Inside, the carriage had just been observed. My wife's waiting-maid ran hastily to her mistress: Helga was lying on her bed; she rose at once, and hurried downstairs, to receive her Majesty—and to warn her Majesty. She was too late. The door was already open. The butler and the footman both had run to it, and thrown it open for the

Queen. As Helga reached the foot of the stairs, her Majesty was just entering the room where Rudolf was, the servants attending her, and Bernenstein standing behind, his helmet in his hand.

Rudolf and the Chancellor had been continuing their conversation. It was an utter surprise to them when, without their orders, the door was suddenly flung open. The Chancellor, slow of movement and not over-quick of brain, sat in his corner for half a minute or more before he rose to his feet. On the other hand, Rudolf Rassendyll was the best part of the way across the room in an instant. Helga was at the door now, and she thrust her head round young Bernenstein's broad shoulder. Thus she saw what happened. The Queen, forgetting the servants, and not observing Helsing, met Rudolf as he ran towards her, and, before Helga or Bernenstein or Rudolf himself could stay her, caught both his hands in hers, crying:

'Rudolf, you're safe! Thank God, oh, thank God!'

A moment of absolute silence followed, dictated in the servants by decorum, in the Chancellor by consideration, in Helga and Bernenstein by utter consternation. The stillness struck her. She looked round the room and saw Helsing, now bowing profoundly from the corner; she turned her head with a sudden frightened jerk and glanced at my motionless servants. Then it came upon her what she had done. She gave a quick gasp for breath, and her face, always pale, went white as marble. Her features set in a strange stiffness, and suddenly she reeled where she stood, and fell forward. Only Rudolf's hand bore her up. Thus for a moment too short to reckon they stood. Then he said in a low tone, yet distinct enough for all to hear:

'All is well, dearest.'

My wife gripped Bernenstein's arm, and he turned to find her pale-face too, with shining eyes. But the eyes had a message and an urgent one for him. He read it; he knew that it bade him second what Rudolf Rassendyll had done. He came forward and approached Rudolf; then he fell on one knee, and kissed Rudolf's left hand that was extended to him.

'I'm very glad to see you, Lieutenant von Bernenstein,' said Rudolf Rassendyll.

For the moment ruin was averted, and safety secured. Everything had been at stake: that there was such a man as Rudolf Rassendyll might have been disclosed; that he had once filled the King's throne was a high secret which they were prepared to trust to Helsing under stress of necessity; but there remained something which must be hidden at all costs. There was a Rudolf Rassendyll, and he had been King, but, more than all this, the Queen loved him and he the Queen. That could be told to none, not even to Helsing; for Helsing, though he would not gossip to the town, would yet hold himself bound to carry the matter to the King. So Rudolf chose to take any future difficulties rather than that present and certain disaster.

But every moment bore its peril and exacted its effort. Rudolf led the Queen to a couch, and then briefly charged the servants not to speak of his presence for a few hours. When they had withdrawn he turned to Helsing, pressed his hand warmly, reiterated his request for silence, and said that he would summon the Chancellor to his presence again later in the day.

Mr. Rassendyll was much disturbed at finding that no tidings had come from Colonel Sapt and myself, but his apprehension was greatly increased on learning from the Queen that the King himself had been at the lodge the

night before. Indeed he was utterly in the dark; where the King was, where Rupert was, where we were, he did not know. And he was here in Strelsau, known as the King to half-a-dozen people or more, protected only by their promises, liable at any moment to be exposed by the coming of the King himself.

Yet in face of all perplexities Rudolf held firm to his purpose. There were two things that seemed plain. If Rupert had escaped the trap, and was still alive with the letter on him, Rupert must be found; here was the first task. That accomplished, there remained for Rudolf himself nothing save to disappear as quietly and secretly as he had come, trusting that his presence could be concealed from the man whose name he had usurped.

At this moment the message which I despatched from the station reached my house. There was a knock at the door. Bernenstein opened it and took the telegram, which was addressed to my wife. I had written all that I dared to trust to such a means of communication, and here it is:—

'I am coming to Strelsau. The King will not leave the lodge to-day. The Count came, but left before we arrived. I do not know whether he has gone to Strelsau. He gave no news to the King.'

'Then they didn't get him!' cried Bernenstein in deep disappointment.

'No, but "He gave no news to the King,"' said Rudolf triumphantly. 'And see this' he went on: '"The King will not leave the lodge to-day." Thank God, then, we have to-day!'

'Yes, but where's Rupert?'

'We shall know in an hour, if he's in Strelsau,' and Mr. Rassendyll looked as though it would please him

well to find Rupert in Strelsau. 'Yes, I must seek him. We have to-day!'

My message put them in heart again, although it left so much still unexplained. Rudolf turned to the Queen:

'Courage, my Queen,' said he. 'A few hours now will see an end of all our dangers.'

'And then?' she asked.

'Then you'll be safe and at rest,' said he. 'And I shall be proud in the knowledge of having saved you.'

## CHAPTER XIII

### A KING UP HIS SLEEVE

THE tall, handsome girl was taking down the shutters from the shop-front at No. 19 in the Königstrasse. Old Mother Holf, leaning against the counter, was grumbling angrily because Bauer did not come. Now it was not likely that Bauer would come just yet, for he was still in the infirmary attached to the police-cells. The old woman knew nothing of this, but only that he had gone the night before to play the spy.

'You're sure he never came back?' she asked her daughter.

'He never came back that I saw,' answered the girl.

'He has been gone twelve hours now, and never a message! Aye, and Count Rupert should be here soon.'

The girl made no answer; she had finished her task and stood looking out on the street. It was past eight, and many people were about. In the road the traffic consisted chiefly of country carts and waggons bringing in produce for the day's victualling of the great city. The row of carts was moving slowly by. One stopped before the shop. The carter got down from his seat and walked round to the back.

'Here you are, sir,' he cried. 'Nineteen, Königstrasse.'

'All right; I'll get down,' came in answer from inside.

'Ah, it's the Count!' said the old lady to her

daughter in satisfied tones. 'What will he say, though, about that rogue Bauer?'

Rupert of Hentzau put his head out from under the waggon-tilt, looked up and down the street, gave the carter a couple of crowns, leapt down, and ran lightly across the pavement into the little shop. The waggon moved on.

'A lucky thing I met him,' said Rupert cheerily. 'The waggon hid me very well, and handsome as my face is, I can't let Strelsau enjoy too much of it just now. Well, mother, what news?'

'It's all as when you left, Count Rupert,' said Mother Holf, 'except that that rascal Bauer went out last night——'

'That's right enough. But hasn't he come back?'

'No, not yet.'

'Hum. No signs of anybody else?'

The old woman shook her head. The girl turned away to hide a smile. 'Anybody else' meant the King, so she suspected. Well, they should hear nothing from her. The King himself had charged her to be silent.

'But Rischenheim has come, I suppose?' pursued Rupert.

'Oh, yes; he came, my lord, soon after you went. He wears his arm in a sling.'

'Ah!' cried Rupert in sudden excitement. 'Where is he?'

'Why, in the attic. You know the way.'

'True. But I want some breakfast, mother.'

'Rosa shall serve you at once, my lord.'

The girl followed Rupert up the narrow crazy staircase of the tall old house. Rupert opened a door that stood at the top of the stairs, and, followed still by Rosa, entered a long narrow room. The ceiling, high in the

centre, sloped rapidly down on either side, so that at door and window it was little more than six feet above the floor. There was an oak table and a few chairs; a couple of iron bedsteads stood by the wall near the window. One was empty; the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim lay on the other, fully dressed, his right arm supported in a sling of black silk. Rupert paused on the threshold, smiling at his cousin; the girl passed on to a high cupboard, and, opening it, took out plates and glasses. Rischenheim sprang up and ran across the room.

'What news?' he cried eagerly. 'You escaped them, Rupert?'

'It appears so,' said Rupert airily; and, advancing into the room, he threw himself into a chair, tossing his hat on to the table.

They waited till they were alone and then, while Rischenheim related how he had been trapped and tricked at the Castle of Zenda, Rupert of Hentzau made a very good breakfast. He offered no interruption and no comments, but when Rudolf Rassendyll's name came into the story he looked up for an instant with a sudden light in his eyes. The end of Rischenheim's narrative found him smiling again.

'Ah, well, the snare was cleverly set,' he said. 'I don't wonder you fell into it.'

'And now you? What happened to you?' asked Rischenheim eagerly.

'I? Why, having your message which was not your message, I obeyed your directions which were not your directions.'

'You went to the lodge?'

'Certainly.'

'But what did you find?'

'I? I found the King's forester and the King's boar-hound, and—well, I found the King himself too.'

'Then you gave him the letter?' cried Rischenheim, trembling with excitement.

'Alas, no, my dear cousin. I threw the box at him, but I don't think he had time to open it.'

'But why not—why not?'

Rupert rose to his feet, and, coming just opposite to where Rischenheim sat, balanced himself on his heels and looked down at his cousin, blowing the ash from his cigarette and smiling pleasantly.

'The boar-hound tried to bite me, cousin. And the forester would have stabbed me. And—well, the King wanted to shoot me.'

'Yes, yes! And what happened?'

'Well, they none of them did what they wanted. That's what happened, dear cousin.'

Rischenheim was staring at him now with wide-opened eyes. Rupert smiled down on him composedly.

'Because, you see,' he added, 'Heaven helped me. So that, my dear cousin, the dog will bite no more, and the forester will stab no more.'

A silence followed. Then Rischenheim, leaning forward, said in a low whisper, as though afraid to hear his own question:

'And the King?'

'The King? Well, the King will shoot no more. Come, I'll tell you a little more about it.' He drew a chair up and seated himself in it.

While he talked Rischenheim seemed hardly to listen. He was appalled at the issue. His cousin's influence had been strong enough to lead him into the affair of the letter; he was aghast to think how Rupert's reckless daredevilry had led on from stage to stage till the death

of a King seemed but an incident in his schemes. He sprang suddenly to his feet crying:

'But we must fly—we must fly!'

'No, we needn't fly. Perhaps we'd better go, but we needn't fly.'

'I'll have no more to do with it.'

'Ah, my good cousin, you despond too soon. The good King is unhappily gone from us, but we still have our dear Queen. We have also our dear Queen's letter.'

'I'll have no more to do with it.'

'Where's Rudolf Rassendyll?' asked Rupert. 'Have you heard of him?'

'No, I don't know where he is.'

'We must find that out, I think.'

Rischenheim turned abruptly on him.

'I had no hand in this thing,' he said, 'and I'll have no more to do with it. I was not there. What did I know of the King being there? I'm not guilty of it.'

'That's all very true,' nodded Rupert.

'Rupert,' cried he, 'if you want money, I'll give it you. For God's sake take it and get out of Strelsau!'

'I'm ashamed to beg, my dear cousin, but in fact I want a little money until I can contrive to realize my valuable property. Is it safe, I wonder? Ah, yes, here it is.'

He drew from his inner pocket to Queen's letter.

Then he walked across to the window and looked out. Men and women passed to and fro on their daily labours or pleasures; there was no unusual stir in the city. Looking across the roofs, Rupert could see the royal standard floating in the wind over the palace and barracks. He took out his watch; it was ten minutes to ten.

'Rischenheim,' he called, 'come here a moment. Here—look out.'

Rischenheim obeyed, and Rupert let him look for a minute or two before speaking again.

'Do you see anything remarkable?' he asked.

'No, nothing,' answered Rischenheim.

'Well, no more do I. And that's very odd. For don't you think that Sapt or some other of her Majesty's friends must have gone to the lodge last night?'

'They meant to, I swear,' said Rischenheim with sudden attention.

'Then they would have found the King. My cousin, why isn't Strelsau mourning for our lamented King? Why aren't the flags at half-mast? I don't understand it.'

Rupert broke into a smile.

'I wonder,' said he meditatively, 'if that old player Sapt has got a king up his sleeve again! If that were so——' He stopped and seemed to fall into deep thought. Then he began to walk up and down the room, smoking another cigarette at a great pace. Rischenheim sat down by the table, resting his head in his hand. He was wearied out by the strain and excitement, his wounded arm pained him greatly, and he was full of horror and remorse at the event which had happened unknown to him the night before.

Rupert stopped before him.

'Rischenheim, I must know what they are doing. You must go and ask an audience of the King.'

'But the King is——'

'We shall know that better when you've asked for your audience. See here.'

Rupert sat down by his cousin and instructed him in his task. This was to discover whether there were a King in Strelsau, or whether the only King lay dead in the hunting-lodge. If there were no attempt being made

to conceal the King's death, Rupert's plan was to seek safety in flight. He did not abandon his designs: from the secure vantage of foreign soil he would, by threatening to publish the Queen's letter, ensure immunity for himself and almost any further terms which he chose to exact from her. If, on the other hand, the Count found a King in Strelsau, and Strelsau knew nothing of the dead man in the lodge, then Rupert had laid his hand on another secret; for he knew who the King in Strelsau must be. Starting from this point, his audacious mind darted forward to new and bolder schemes. He could offer to Rudolf Rassendyll a partnership in crime and the profits of crime—or, if this advance were refused, then he declared that he would himself descend openly into the streets of Strelsau and proclaim the death of the King from the steps of the Cathedral.

'Who can tell,' he cried, 'whether Sapt or I came to the lodge first? Who had most interest in killing the King—I, who only sought to make him aware of what touched his honour, or Sapt, who is hand and glove with the man that now robs him of his name and usurps his place? Ah, they haven't done with Rupert of Hentzau yet!'

He stopped, looking down on his companion. Rischenheim's fingers still twitched nervously and his cheeks were pale. But now his face was alight with interest and eagerness.

'But where shall I look for the King?' he asked.

'Why, in the palace, or at Fritz von Tarlenheim's.'

'You'll wait here?'

'Certainly, cousin—unless I see cause to move.'

Rischenheim snatched up a revolver that lay on the mantelpiece and put it in his pocket.

Don't fire, if you can help it,' advised Rupert.

Rischenheim's answer was to make for the door at a great speed. He plunged down the stairs: his feet were too slow for his eagerness. At the bottom he found the girl Rosa sweeping the passage.

'You're going out, my lord?' she asked.

'Why, yes; I have business.'

'And Count Rupert, is he going out also?'

'You see he's not with me. What business is it of yours, girl? Get out of the way!'

She moved aside now, making him no answer. He rushed past; she looked after him with a smile of triumph. The King had bidden her to be ready at eleven. It was half-past ten. Soon the King would have need of her.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE NEWS COMES TO STRELSAU

On leaving No. 19, Rischenheim walked swiftly some little way up the Königstrasse, and then hailed a cab. He drove straight to my house, where he met the Chancellor just leaving.

'What's going on here, my dear Chancellor?' asked Rischenheim, looking round on the group of bystanders. 'What are all these people hanging about here for? Ah, that's a royal carriage!'

'The Queen's with the Countess,' answered Helsing. 'The people are waiting to see her come out.'

'And you've been to visit her?' pursued Rischenheim.

'Why, yes. I—I went to pay my respects, my dear Rischenheim.'

'An early visit!'

'It was more or less on business.'

'Ah, I have business also, and very important business. But it's with the King.'

'Indeed, my dear Count, indeed! Dear me!'

'But perhaps you can help me. Is he at Zenda?'

The Chancellor was becoming very embarrassed.

'Or perhaps,' said Rischenheim, 'her Majesty would condescend to help me? I think I'll risk a request. She can but refuse,' and so saying he approached the door.

'Oh my friend, I wouldn't do that,' cried Helsing, darting after him. 'The Queen is—well, very much engaged. She won't like to be troubled.'

Rischenheim took no notice of him, but knocked loudly. The door was opened, and he told the butler to carry his name to the Queen and beg a moment's speech with her. He edged himself inside the doorway and stood on the threshold of the hall. There he heard voices proceeding from the sitting-room on the left. He recognized the Queen's, and my wife's.

The door of the room opened; the butler appeared, and immediately behind him Bernenstein. He passed the butler, who made way for him, and came to where Rischenheim stood.

'We meet again,' said Rischenheim with a bow.

The butler stepped up and delivered his message: the Queen regretted her inability to receive the Count. Rischenheim nodded, and, standing so that the door could not be shut, asked Bernenstein whether he knew where the King was.

'Do you want another interview with the King already?' asked Bernenstein with a smile.

Rischenheim took no notice of the taunt, but observed sarcastically:

'There's a strange difficulty in finding our good King. The Chancellor here doesn't know where he is, or at least he won't answer my questions.'

'Possibly the King has his reasons for not wishing to be disturbed,' suggested Bernenstein.

'It's very possible,' retorted Rischenheim.

Suddenly a voice came from inside the hall; it was distinct and loud, yet not without a touch of huskiness. Bernenstein looked aghast, Rischenheim nervous yet triumphant.

'Is that the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim?' called Rudolf from within. 'If so, let him enter and then shut the door.'

There was something in his tone that alarmed Rischenheim. He started back as though he meditated flight. The next moment Bernenstein was thrust aside. For one short instant a tall figure appeared in the doorway; the crowd had but a glimpse, yet they recognized the King and cheered. Rischenheim's hand was clasped in a firm grip; he passed unwillingly but helplessly through the door. Bernenstein followed; the door was shut.

Rudolf then caught Rischenheim by the arm, and without a moment's delay led him towards the back of the house. They went along a passage and reached a small room that looked out on the garden.

'Shut the door, Bernenstein,' said Rudolf. Then he turned to Rischenheim. 'My lord,' he said, 'I suppose you came to find out something. Do you know it now?'

Rischenheim plucked up courage to answer him.

'Yes, I know now that I have to deal with an impostor,' said he defiantly.

'Precisely. And impostors cannot afford to be exposed.'

Rischenheim's cheek turned rather pale. He was absolutely at their mercy; and he knew their secret. Did they know his—the news that Rupert of Hentzau had brought?

'Listen,' said Rudolf. 'For a few hours to-day I am King in Strelsau. In those few hours I have an account to settle with your cousin; something that he has I must have. I'm going now to seek him, and while I seek him you will stay here with Bernenstein. Whether I succeed, or fail, by to-night I shall be far from Strelsau and the King's place will be free for him again.'

Rischenheim gave a slight start, and a look of triumph

spread over his face. They did not know that the King was dead.

Rudolf came nearer to him, fixing his eyes steadily on his prisoner's face.

'I don't know,' he continued, 'why you are in this business, my lord. Your cousin's motives I know well. But I wonder that they seemed to you great enough to justify the ruin of an unhappy lady, who is your Queen.'

Rischenheim made him no answer.

'Keep him here, Bernenstein. When I return I'll tell you what more to do. If I don't return, Fritz will be here soon, and you and he must make your own plans.'

And with a slight bow Rudolf left the prisoner in Bernenstein's charge, and went back to the room where the Queen awaited him. Helga was with her. The Queen sprang up to meet him.

'I mustn't lose a moment,' he said. 'All that crowd of people know now that the King is here. The news will filter through the town in no time. We must send word to Sapt to keep it from the King's ears at all costs: I must go and do my work, and then disappear. You must return to the palace as soon as I am gone.'

Even as he spoke they heard the wheels of a carriage driven quickly to the door. By now I had met Anton von Strofzin, and heard from him that the King was at my house.

I sprang out and ran up the steps to the door. I saw my wife's face at the window: she herself ran to the door and opened it for me.

'Helga!' I whispered, 'do all these people know he's here, and take him for the King?'

'Yes,' she said. 'We couldn't help it, he showed himself at the door.'

It was worse than I dreamt: not two or three people but all that crowd had heard that the King was in Strelsau—aye, and had seen him.

'Where is he? Where is he?' I asked, and followed her hastily to the room.

The Queen and Rudolf were standing side by side. Rudolf ran to meet me.

'Is all well?' he asked eagerly.

I caught Rudolf by the arm and cried to him:

'Do they take you for the King?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Heavens, man, don't look so white! I can be gone by to-night.'

The three were standing round me, surprised at my terrible agitation.

Rudolf tried again to reassure me.

'It won't take long to settle affairs with Rupert,' said he. 'And we must have the letter, or it will get to the King after all.'

'The King will never see the letter,' I blurted out as I sank back in a chair. 'Rupert himself has ensured that.'

'What do you mean? You've not met Rupert? You've not got the letter?'

'No, no; but the King can never read it.'

Then Rudolf seized me by the shoulder and fairly shook me.

'Why not, man, why not?' he asked.

I rubbed my hands across my forehead, and, looking up stupidly at them, I said:

'He can never see the letter. He's dead.'

There was a little scream from Helga; Rudolf neither spoke nor moved; the Queen gazed at me in motionless wonder and horror.

'Rupert killed him,' said I.

'When was it?' asked Rudolf, after a long silence.

'Last night.'

'And the . . . He's at the lodge?'

'Yes, with Sapt and James. Nobody knows yet.'

Mr. Rassendyll's lips were set firm and tight. He frowned slightly, and his blue eyes wore a curious expression. He seemed to me to be forgetful of everything, even of us who were with him, in some one idea that possessed him.

'What's to be done, Rudolf?' I asked.

'I'm going to kill Rupert of Hentzau,' he said. 'The rest we'll talk of afterwards.'

He walked rapidly across the room and rang the bell.

'Clear those people away,' he ordered. 'Tell them that I want to be quiet. Then send a closed carriage round for me. Don't be more than ten minutes. Fritz, send word to Sapt that the King is in Strelsau—he will understand—and that instructions from the King will follow by midday. When I have killed Rupert, I shall visit the lodge on my way to the frontier.'

He turned to go, but the Queen following, detained him for a minute.

'You'll come and see me before you go?' she pleaded.

'Yes, my Queen.'

Then I sprang up, for a sudden dread laid hold on me.

'Heavens, man!' I cried, 'what if he kills you—there in the Königstrasse?'

Rudolf turned to me; there was a look of surprise on his face.

'He won't kill me,' he answered.

The Queen, looking still in Rudolf's face, and for-

getful now, it seemed, of the dream that had so terrified her, took no notice of what I said, but urged again:

'You'll come, Rudolf?'

'Yes, once, my Queen,' and with a last kiss of her hand he was gone.

The Queen stood for yet another moment where she was, still and almost rigid. Then suddenly she walked or stumbled to where my wife sat, and, flinging herself on her knees, hid her face in Helga's lap; I heard her sobs break out fast and tumultuously. Helga looked up at me, the tears streaming down her cheeks. I turned and went out.

## CHAPTER XV

### A PASTIME FOR COLONEL SAPT

The Constable of Zenda and James, Mr. Rassendyll's servant, sat at breakfast in the hunting-lodge. The door of the house was securely fastened: they were prepared to refuse admission; in case refusal were impossible, the preparations for concealing the King's body and that of his huntsman Herbert were complete. Inquirers would be told that the King had ridden out with his huntsman at daybreak, promising to return in the evening, but not stating where he was going. Thus armed against discovery, they looked for news from me which should determine their future action.

Meanwhile there was an interval of enforced idleness. Sapt, his meal finished, puffed away at his great pipe; James sat at his ease with his legs stretched before him. His brows were knit, and a curious half-smile played about his mouth.

'What may you be thinking about, friend James?' asked the Constable between two puffs. He had taken a fancy to the alert, ready little fellow.

James smoked for a moment, then took his pipe from his mouth.

'I was thinking, sir, that, since the King is dead and Mr. Rassendyll is alive, it was a great pity that my master can't take his place and be King.'

James looked across at the Constable with an air of a man who offers a respectful suggestion.

'A remarkable thought, James,' observed the Constable with a grin. 'But you see it's impossible, isn't it?'

'When you say impossible, sir,' James remarked, 'I venture to differ from you.'

'You do? Come, we're at leisure. Let's hear how it would be possible.'

'My master is in Strelsau, sir,' began James.

'Well, most likely.'

'I'm sure of it, sir. If he's seen there, he will be taken for the King, unless the King's body should be discovered first.'

'He will, James.'

James kept silence for a few minutes. Then he continued:

'It will be very awkward to explain how the King was killed.'

'The story will need good telling,' admitted Sapt.

'And it will be difficult to make it appear that the King was killed in Strelsau; yet if my master should chance to be killed in Strelsau——'

'Heaven forbid, James!'

'Even if my master is not killed, it will be difficult for us to get the King killed at the right time, and by means that will seem plausible.'

Sapt seemed to fall into the humour of the speculation.

'That's all very true. But if Mr. Rassendyll is to be King, it will be both awkward and difficult to dispose of the King's body and of this poor fellow Herbert,' said he, sucking at his pipe.

Again James paused for a little while before he remarked:

'I am, of course, sir, only discussing the matter by way of passing the time. It would probably be wrong to carry any such plan into effect.'

'It might be, but let us discuss it—to pass the time,' said Sapt; and he leant forward, looking into the servant's quiet, shrewd face.

'Well, then, sir, let us say that the King came to the lodge last night, and was joined there by his friend Mr. Rassendyll.'

'And did I come too?'

'You, sir, came also, in attendance on the King.'

'Well, and you, James? You came. How came you?'

'Why, sir, by the Count of Tarlenheim's orders, to wait on Mr. Rassendyll, the King's friend. Now the King, sir. . . . This is my story, you know, sir, only my story.'

'Your story interests me. Go on with it.'

'The King went out very early this morning on private business. But Mr. Rassendyll, Herbert, and ourselves remained here.'

'Had the Count of Hentzau been?'

'Not to our knowledge, sir. But we were all tired and slept very soundly, and full morning found us still in our beds. There we should be to this moment, sir, had we not been suddenly aroused in a startling and fearful manner. This lodge, sir, this wooden lodge, through someone's carelessness had caught on fire. We found it a mass of flames, and ran for our lives.'

'What? Should we make no effort to rouse the others?'

'Indeed, sir, we should do all that men could do; we should even risk death by suffocation.'

'But we should fail, in spite of our heroism, should we?'

'Alas, sir, in spite of all our efforts we should fail. The flames would envelop the lodge in one blaze; before help could come, the lodge would be in ruins and my

unhappy master and poor Herbert would be consumed to ashes.'

'Hum!'

'They would, at least, sir, be entirely unrecognizable.'

'You think so?'

'Beyond doubt, if the oil and firewood and a candle were placed to the best advantage.'

'Ah, yes. And there would be an end of Rudolf Rassendyll?'

'Sir, I should myself carry the tidings to his family.'

'Whereas the King of Ruritania——'

'Would enjoy a long and prosperous reign.'

Sapt laid down his pipe now, and his eyes looked hard into James's. The little man met his glance composedly.

'It's an ingenious story this of yours, James,' the Constable remarked, 'but—your master wouldn't approve of it.'

'It's waste of time, sir, disapproving of what's done: he might think the story better than the truth, although it's not a good story.'

The instant he had spoken, James sprang to his feet and pointed out of the window.

A man on horseback was cantering towards the lodge. Exchanging one quick look, both hastened to the door and, advancing some twenty yards, waited under the tree, on the spot where Boris lay buried. The messenger came up and, leaning from his horse, handed Sapt a telegram.

Special and urgent, sir,' said he.

Sapt tore it open and read. It was the message that I sent in obedience to Mr. Rassendyll's orders. It said simply:—

'The King is in Strelsau. Wait orders at the lodge. Business here in progress, but not finished. Will wire again.'

Sapt handed it to James, who took it with a respectful bow. James read it with attention, and returned it with another bow.

'I'll attend to what it says, sir,' he remarked.

'Yes,' said Sapt. 'Thanks, my man,' he added to the messenger. 'Here's a crown for you.' With a parting salute, the fellow turned his horse and trotted away.

'You see,' remarked Sapt, 'that your story is quite imaginary. For that fellow can see for himself that the lodge was not burnt down last night.'

'That's true; but excuse me, sir—'

'Pray go on, James. I've told you that I'm interested.

'He can't see that it won't be burnt down to-night. A fire, sir, is a thing that may happen any night.'

Then old Sapt suddenly burst into a roar, half-speech, half-laughter.

'There's a fate about it,' said he. 'The man was born to it. Young Rupert may think this new affair is his doing. No, it's the fate using him. The fate brought Rudolf here again, the fate will have him King.'

The two were back in their little room now, past the door that hid the bodies of the King and his huntsman. James stood by the table, old Sapt roamed up and down, tugging his moustache and now and again sawing the air with his sturdy hairy hand.

'I daren't do it,' he muttered. 'But the fate'll do it. The fate'll force it on us.'

'Then we'd best be ready, sir,' suggested James.

Sapt came to him and caught hold of his shoulders.

'Ready?' he asked in a gruff whisper

'The oil, the firewood, the light,' said James.

'Where, man, where? Do you mean by the bodies?'

'Not where the bodies are now. Each must be in the proper place.'

Sapt almost glared at him; then he burst into a laugh.

'So be it,' he said. 'You take command. Yes, we'll be ready. The fate drives.'

Then and there they set about what they had to do. They placed the bodies each where the living man would be by night. They dug up the buried dog, and laid it in the King's room. Then they made their piles of wood, pouring the store of oil over them, and setting bottles of spirits near, that the flames, having cracked the bottles, might gain fresh fuel. Mr. Rassendyll's servant moved and arranged and ordered all as deftly as he folded his master's clothes or stropped his master's razor.

When they had finished their task and sat down again opposite to one another in the little front room, the whole scheme was ready; they waited only for that impulse from chance or fate which was to turn the servant's story into reality.

'It's two o'clock, sir,' said James. 'Something should have happened before now in Strelsau.'

'Ah, but what?' asked the Constable.

Suddenly breaking on their ears came a loud knock at the door. Absorbed in their own thoughts, they had not noticed two men riding up to the lodge. The visitors wore the green and gold of the King's huntsmen; the one who had knocked was Simon, the chief huntsman, and brother of Herbert who lay dead in the little room inside.

Simon was astonished when Sapt opened the door.

'Beg pardon, Constable, but I want to see Herbert. Can I go in?' And he jumped down from his horse.

'What's the good of your going in?' asked Sapt. Herbert's not here.'

'Not here? Then where is he?'

'Why, he went with the King this morning.

'But the King is in Strelsau, sir. I am just from Zenda, and his Majesty is known to have been in town with the Queen. They were both at Count Fritz's.'

'I'm much interested to hear it.'

'Well, I'll come again to-morrow morning, for I must see Herbert soon. He'll be back by then, sir?'

'Yes, Simon, your brother will be here to-morrow morning.'

'By the way,' said Simon, 'there's another bit of news come on the wires. They say Count Rupert of Hentzau has been in the city. Perhaps that's what took the King to Strelsau.'

'It's enough to take him if it's true,' admitted Sapt.

'Well, good-day, sir.'

'Good-day, Simon.'

The two huntsmen rode off. James watched them for a little while.

'The King,' he said then, 'is known to be in Strelsau; and now Count Rupert is known to be in Strelsau. How is Count Rupert to have killed the King here in the forest of Zenda, sir?'

Sapt looked at him almost apprehensively.

'How is the King's body to come to the forest of Zenda?' asked James. 'Or how is the King's body to go to the city of Strelsau?'

'Stop your riddles!' roared Sapt. 'Man, are you bent on driving me into it?'

'If we don't do it, sir, the truth about my master must be known.'

Sapt made him no answer. They sat down again in silence, sometimes smoking, never speaking, while the

tedious afternoon wore away and the shadows from the trees of the forest lengthened. They did not think of eating or drinking ; they did not move, save when James rose and lit a little fire of brushwood in the grate. It grew dusk, and James moved to light the lamp. It was hard on six o'clock, and still no news came from Strelsau.

Then there was the sound of a horse's hoofs. The two rushed to the door. There was a message from Strelsau !

The Constable snatched the envelope from the hand of the messenger and tore it open. He read it hastily, muttering under his breath, 'Good God !' Then he turned suddenly to James.

'Come along, my king-maker,' said he.

James looked in his face for a moment. The Constable's eyes met his, and the Constable nodded.

So they went into the lodge where the dead King and his huntsman lay. Verily the fate drove.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A CROWD IN THE KÖNIGSTRASSE

MEANWHILE in Strelsau Mr. Rassendyll had centred all his efforts on the immediate task which fell to his hand to perform, the task that was to be accomplished at the dingy old house in the Königstrasse. We were fully awake to the fact that even Rupert's death would not make the secret safe. Rischenheim, although for a moment a prisoner and helpless, was alive and could not be mewed up for ever; Bauer was free to act and free to talk. Yet in our hearts we feared none but Rupert.

A message in the King's name had persuaded the best part of the idle crowd to disperse. Rudolf himself had entered one of my carriages and driven off. He started, not towards the Königstrasse, but in the opposite direction; I supposed that he meant to approach his destination by a circuitous way, hoping to gain it without attracting notice. The Queen's carriage was still before my door, for it had been arranged that she was to proceed to the palace and await tidings there. My wife and I were to accompany her; and I went to her now, where she sat alone, and asked if it were her pleasure to start at once. I found her thoughtful but calm. She listened to me; then, rising, she said, 'Yes, I will go.' But then she asked suddenly, 'Where is the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim?'

I told her how Bernenstein kept guard over the Count in the room at the back of the house. She seemed to consider for a moment, then she said, 'I will see him. Go and bring him to me.'

I led Rischenheim to the Queen and left them. What passed between them, I cannot tell, nor by what means the Queen awakened in Count Rischenheim that sense of honour which Rupert's evil influence had deadened. I only know that she succeeded in winning him over, for when I went back to the room at her summons, she turned to me, and said :

'The Count of Luzau-Rischenheim may be trusted to be silent. We ask him to do nothing against his cousin. We ask only his silence. The Count will keep his word, given to me.'

There was nothing for it but to trust him.

'Then I'll see if the carriage is ready,' said I.

'Yes, do, Fritz,' said the Queen.

I went out, and found Bernenstein sitting on a bench in the hall. The Lieutenant was a diligent and watchful young man ; he appeared to be examining his revolver with care.

'You can put that away,' said I rather peevishly. 'Rischenheim is not a prisoner any longer. He's one of us now.'

A light gleamed in Bernenstein's eyes, and I felt a tremble in the hand that he laid on my shoulder.

'Then there's only Bauer now,' he whispered. 'If Rischenheim's with us, only Bauer.'

I knew very well what he meant. With Rischenheim silent, Bauer was the only man, save Rupert himself, who knew the truth.

I drove to the palace with the Queen and my wife, Bernenstein and Rischenheim following in a second carriage. With us my wife was the principal speaker : she filled up, from what Rudolf had told her, the gaps in our knowledge of how he had spent his night in Strelsau, and by the time we finished our drive we were fully

informed in every detail. The Queen said little. The impulse which had dictated her appeal to Rischenheim seemed to have died away; she had become again subject to fears and apprehension.

Our way did not lie by the house in the Königstrasse, and we came to the palace without any news of our absent chief.

It was now two hours since Rudolf Rassendyll had left us, but no word had come of him or from him. I could bear it no longer. I rose abruptly and crossed the room to where the Queen was sitting.

'Have you need of my presence, madame, or have I your permission to be away for a time?' I asked.

'Where do you wish to go, Fritz?' the Queen asked with a little start, as though I had come suddenly across her thoughts.

'To the Königstrasse,' said I.

To my surprise she rose and caught my hand.

'God bless you, Fritz!' she cried. 'I don't think I could have endured it longer. But I wouldn't ask you to go. But go, my dear friend, go and bring me news of him.'

Well, I went, leaving the two women there together. I put on plain clothes instead of my uniform and dropped my revolver into the pocket of my coat. Thus prepared, I slipped out and made my way on foot to the Königstrasse.

It was now long past midday. Many folk were still at their dinner and the streets were not full. There was no sign of stir or excitement, and the flags still floated high in the wind. Sapt had kept the secret: the men of Strelsau thought still that their King lived and was among them. When I reached the house there were no more than ten or a dozen idle fellows lounging about.

I began to stroll up and down with as careless an air as I could assume.

Soon, however, there was a change. The workmen and business-folk, their meal finished, began to come out of their houses and from the restaurants. The loafers before No. 19 told them that the King was within, for Mr. Rassendyll had been unable to gain the house undetected. Thus the assembly had grown to the number of a couple of hundred. I ceased my walk, for the pavement was too crowded, and hung on the outskirts of the throng. As I loitered there, a cigar in my mouth, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Turning round, I saw Bernenstein. He was in uniform. By his side was Rischenheim.

'You're here too, are you?' said I. 'Well, nothing seems to be happening, does it?'

For No. 19 showed no sign of life. The shutters were up, the door closed; the little shop was not open for business that day.

Bernenstein shook his head with a smile. His companion took no heed of my remark; he was evidently in a state of great agitation, and his eyes never left the door of the house. I was about to address him, when my attention was abruptly diverted by a glimpse of a head, caught across the shoulders of the bystanders. It was Bauer's head with a white bandage round it.

Saying nothing to Bernenstein, I began to steal round outside the crowd and worked my way unobtrusively towards the bandaged head. Evidently Bauer's hurt had not been so serious as to prevent him leaving the infirmary to which the police had carried him. He was come now to await, even as I was awaiting, the issue of Rudolf's visit to the house in the Kōnigstrasse.

He had not seen me, for he was looking at No. 19 as intently as Rischenheim. My mind was full of the idea of getting hold of him. I could not forget Bernenstein's remark, 'Only Bauer now!' I crept cautiously up behind him. His hand was in his trousers' pocket; where the curve of the elbow came there was space between arm and body. I slipped in my left arm and hooked it firmly inside his. He turned round and saw me.

'Thus we meet again, Bauer,' said I.

He was for a moment flabbergasted, and stared stupidly at me.

'Are you also hoping to see the King?' I asked.

A slow cunning smile spread over his face.

'The King?' he asked.

'Well, he's in Strelsau, isn't he? Who gave you the wound on your head?'

Bauer moved his arm as though he meant to withdraw it from my grasp. He found himself tightly held.

'Where's that bag of mine?' I asked. I do not know what he would have answered, for at this instant there came a sound from behind the closed door of the house. It was as if someone ran rapidly and eagerly towards the door. Full of eagerness, I drew my arm from Bauer's and sprang forward. I heard a chuckle from him, and turned round to see his bandaged head retreating rapidly down the street. I had no time to look for him; for now I saw two men, shoulder to shoulder, making their way through the crowd, regardless of anyone in their way, and paying no attention to abuse or remonstrances. They were the Lieutenant and Rischenheim.

Without a moment's hesitation I set myself to push and battle a way through, thinking to join them in front. All gave place before us in surly reluctance or frightened

willingness. We three were together in the first rank of the crowd when the door of the house was flung open, and a girl ran out. Her hair was disordered, her face pale, and her eyes full of alarm. There she stood on the doorstep, facing the crowd, which in an instant grew as if by magic to three times its former size and she cried in the eager accents of sheer terror:

'Help, help! The King! The King!'

## CHAPTER XVII

### YOUNG RUPERT AND THE PLAY-ACTOR

There rises often before my mind the picture of young Rupert, standing where Rischenheim left him, awaiting the return of his messenger and watching for some sign that should declare to Strelsau the death of its King. Save for Rischenheim—a broken reed—and Bauer, he stood alone against a kingdom which he had robbed of its head and a band of resolute men who would know no rest and no security so long as he lived. For protection he had only a quick brain, his courage, and his secret. Such men do not repent; but it may be that he regretted the enterprise which had forced on him the King's murder; yet to those who knew him it seems more likely that the smile broadened on his firm full lips as he looked down on the unconscious city.

Down below, the old woman was cooking a stew for her dinner, now and then grumbling to herself that the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim was so long away, and Bauer, the rascal, drunk in some pot-house. The kitchen door stood open, and through it could be seen the girl Rosa, busily scrubbing the tiled floor; her colour was high and her eyes bright; from time to time she paused in her task, and raising her head, seemed to listen. The time at which the King needed her was past, but the King had not come.

There were wheels in the street—quick-rolling wheels. They seemed to stop a few doors away, then to roll on again past the house. The girl's straining ear caught a

rapid step outside. Then it came—the knock, the sharp knock followed by five light ones.

Rosa darted down the passage. The door opened and shut again. The old woman waddled to the threshold of the kitchen. The passage and the shop were dark behind closed shutters but the figure by the girl's side was taller than Bauer's.

'Who's there?' cried Mother Holf sharply. 'The shop's shut to-day; you can't come in.'

'But I am in,' came the answer, and Rudolf stepped towards her. 'Don't you know me? Where is Count Rupert?'

The old woman could do nothing but stare open-mouthed at Rudolf. The girl caught alarm from her mother's agitation.

'He's upstairs in the attic at the top of the house, sir,' she whispered in frightened tones.

What she said was enough for him. He slipped by the old woman and began to mount the stairs.

The two watched him, Mother Holf as though fascinated, the girl alarmed but still triumphant; she had done what the King bade her. Rudolf turned the corner of the first landing and disappeared from their sight. The old woman swearing and muttering, stumbled back into her kitchen.

Rosa skimmed upstairs, till she came in sight of the King whom she was so proud to serve. He was outside the door of the large attic where Rupert of Hentzau was lodged. She saw him open the door and walk in. The girl darted breathlessly up the remaining steps, and coming to the door just as it swung back crouched down by it, listening to what passed within, and catching glimpses of forms and movements through the chinks of the crazy hinge.

Rupert of Hentzau had no thought of ghosts; the men he killed lay still where they fell, and slept where they were buried. And he had no wonder at the sight of Rudolf Rassendyll. As Rudolf entered, he had been half way between window and table; he came forward to the table now, and stood leaning the points of two fingers on the unpolished, dirty wood.

'Ah, the play-actor!' said he, with a gleam of his teeth and a toss of his curls, while one hand, like Mr. Rassendyll's, rested in the pocket of his coat.

'Yes, the play-actor,' Rudolf answered, smiling. 'With a shorter part this time, though.'

'What part to-day, play-actor?'

'Why not call me King?' asked Rudolf.

'They call you that in Strelsau?'

'Those that know I'm here.'

'And thus,' said Rupert, waving an arm towards the window, 'the town is quiet and the flags fly.'

'You've been waiting here to see them lowered?'

'A man likes to have some notice taken of what he has done,' Rupert complained. 'However, I can get them lowered when I will.'

'By telling the world that you have murdered the King? Would that be good for yourself?'

'Forgive me—not that way. Since the King has two lives, it is but in nature that he should have two deaths.'

'And when he has undergone the second?'

'I shall live at peace, my friend, on a certain source of income that I possess.' He tapped his breast-pocket with a slight defiant laugh. 'In these days,' said he, 'even queens must be careful about their letters.'

Rudolf grew grave. He advanced towards the table and spoke in low, serious tones.

'My lord, you're alone in this matter now. Rischenheim is a prisoner; your rogue Bauer I encountered last night and broke his head.'

'Ah, you did?'

'You have the Queen's letter in your hands. If you yield, on my honour I will save your life. Come, sir, your plan has failed: give up the letter'

Rupert looked at him thoughtfully.

'You'll see me safe off if I give it you?' he asked.

'I'll prevent your death. Yes, and I'll see you safe.'

'Where to?'

'To a fortress, where a trustworthy gentleman will guard you. It's impossible to set you free.'

'That's the offer, then?'

'The extreme limit of indulgence,' answered Rudolf.

Rupert burst into a laugh, half of defiance, yet touched with the ring of true amusement. Then he raised his arms and stretched them above his head, as a man does in the fatigue of tedium. 'Heigho!' he yawned.

But he had overshot the mark this time. With a sudden swift bound Rudolf was upon him; his hands gripped Rupert's wrists, and with his greater strength he bent back the Count's pliant body till trunk and head lay flat on the table. Neither man spoke; their eyes met; each heard the other's breathing and felt the vapour of it on his face.

Slowly and with patient force Rudolf began to work his enemy's arms towards one another. Now the wrists were side by side, and slowly the long sinewy fingers of Rudolf's right hand, that held one wrist already in their vice, began to creep round the other; gradually and timidly the grasp of the other hand was relaxed and

withdrawn. He could hold both, with one hand he could hold both Rupert's wrists: not for long, no, but for an instant. And then, in the instant, his left hand, free at last, shot to the breast of the Count's coat. Rudolf tore it open, and his hand dashed in.

Then he drew out a letter. A glance at it showed him the Queen's seal. As he glanced Rupert made a great effort. The one hand, wearied out, gave way, and Mr. Rassendyll had no more than time to spring away, holding his prize. The next moment he had his revolver in his hand—none too soon, for Rupert of Hentzau's barrel faced him, and they stood thus, opposite to one another, with no more than three or four feet between the mouths of their weapons.

It was no feeling of fear, but rather a cool calculation of chances that now stayed Rupert's hand. Even if he were victorious in the duel, and both did not die, yet the noise of firearms would greatly decrease his chances of escape. Moreover, he was a noted swordsman, and conceived that he was Mr. Rassendyll's superior in that exercise. The steel offered him at once a better prospect of victory and more hope of a safe flight. So he did not pull his trigger, but, maintaining his aim the while, said:

'I'm not a street bully, and I don't excel in a rough-and-tumble. Will you fight now like a gentleman? There's a pair of blades in the case yonder.'

Mr. Rassendyll, in his turn, was keenly alive to the peril that still hung over the Queen. To kill Rupert would not serve her if he himself also were shot and left dead, or so helpless that he could not destroy the letter. Nor did he fear the result of a trial with steel, for he had kept himself in practice and improved his skill since the days when he came first to Strelsau.

'As you will,' said he. 'Provided we settle the matter here and now, the manner is the same to me.'

'Put your revolver on the table, then, and I'll lay mine beside it.'

'I beg your pardon,' smiled Rudolf, 'but you must lay yours down first.'

'I'm to trust you, it seems, but you won't trust me!'

'Precisely.'

A sudden flush swept over Rupert of Hentzau's face. His brows knit in a frown and his lips shut tight.

'Aye, but though you won't fire, you'll destroy the letter,' he sneered.

'Again I beg your pardon. You know very well that, although all Strelsau were at the door, I wouldn't touch the letter.'

With an angry muttered oath Rupert flung his revolver on the table. Rudolf came forward and laid his by it. Then he took up both, and, crossing to the mantelpiece, laid them there; between them he placed the Queen's letter. A bright blaze burnt in the stove; it needed but the slightest motion of his hand to set the letter beyond all danger. But he placed it carefully on the mantelpiece.

All this while they had been speaking in subdued accents. The girl outside caught only a word here and there; but now suddenly the flash of steel gleamed on her eyes through the crevice of the hinge. For Rupert of Hentzau had taken the swords from their case and put them on the table. With a slight bow Rudolf took one, and the two assumed their positions. Suddenly Rupert lowered his point. The frown vanished from his face, and he spoke in his usual bantering tone.

'By the way,' said he, 'perhaps we're letting our feelings run away with us. Have you a mind now to be

King of Ruritania? If so I'm ready to be the most faithful of your subjects.'

'You honour me, Count.'

'Provided, of course, that I'm one of the most favoured and the richest. Come, come, the King is dead now; he lived like a fool and he died like a fool. Take his place. You can pay my price then.'

'Come, Count, you'd be the last man to trust Rupert of Hentzau.'

'If I made it worth his while?'

'But he's a man who would take the pay and betray his associate.'

Again Rupert flushed. When he next spoke his voice was hard, cold, and low.

'Rudolf Rassendyll,' said he, 'I'll kill you here and now.'

'I ask no better than that you should try. Guard yourself, my lord,' said Mr. Rassendyll.

The steel jangled. The girl's pale face was at the crevice of the hinge. She heard the blades cross again and again. Then one would run up the other with a sharp grating noise. At times she caught a glimpse of a figure in quick forward lunge or rapid withdrawal. Then a cry rang out, clear and merry with the fierce hope of triumph:

'Nearly! nearly!'

She knew the voice for Rupert of Hentzau's, and it was the King who answered calmly:

'Nearly isn't quite.'

Again she listened. They seemed to be pausing for a moment, for there was no sound, save of the hard breathing and deep-drawn pants of men who rest an instant in the midst of intense exertion. Then one of them crossed into her view. She knew the tall figure and she saw the



'GUARD YOURSELF, MY LORD,' SAID MR. RASSENDYLL

red hair; it was the King. Backward step by step he seemed to be driven, coming nearer and nearer to the door.

It was the King—her King—her dear King, who was in great peril of his life! For an instant she knelt, still watching. Then with a low cry of terror she turned and ran headlong down the steep stairs.

She fled down the passage and through the shop. Then she flung the door wide. A new amazement filled her eyes at the sight of the eager crowd before the house. Then her eyes fell on me where I stood beside the Lieutenant and Rischenheim, and she uttered her wild cry 'Help! The King!'

With one bound I was by her and in the house, while Bernenstein cried 'Quicker!' from behind.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE TRIUMPH OF THE KING

MR. RASSENDYLL had strength, will, coolness, and of course, courage. None would have availed had not his eye been in perfect familiarity with its work and his hand obeyed it readily. The agility and dash of young Rupert just missed being too much for him. He was in deadly peril when the girl Rosa ran down to bring him aid. His practised skill was able to maintain his defence. He sought to do no more, but endured Rupert's fiery attacks in an almost motionless stillness.

There was an instant—Rudolf saw it in his eyes—when there dawned on Rupert of Hentzau the knowledge that he could not break down his enemy's guard. Surprise, chagrin, amusement, seemed blended in his look. He could not make out how he was caught and checked in every effort. His quick brain grasped the lesson in an instant. If his skill were not the greater, the victory would not be his, for his endurance was the less. But what the hand could not compass the head might contrive. He retreated a step or two. Backing before his opponent, he seemed to Rudolf to be faint-hearted; he was weary, but pretended a more complete fatigue. Rudolf advanced, pressing and attacking, only to meet a defence as perfect as his own. Rupert had but a few moments' more effort left in him: it was enough if he could perpetrate the trick on which his mind was set. For it was towards the mantelpiece that his retreat led him. If he could not win by force and skill he would win by guile. The revolvers

lay on the mantelpiece: he meant to possess himself of one, if he could gain an instant in which to snatch it.

He was hard by the mantelpiece now. The sweat was pouring from his face, and his breast seemed like to burst in the effort after breath; yet he had enough strength for his purpose. He must have slackened his hold on his sword, for when Rudolf's blade next struck it, it flew from his hand and slid along the floor. Rupert stood disarmed, and Rudolf motionless.

'Pick it up,' said Mr. Rassendyll, never thinking there had been a trick.

He lowered his blade, resting its point on the floor, while with his left hand he indicated Rupert's weapon.

'You swear you won't touch me while I pick it up?' asked Rupert, shrinking back a little and thereby getting an inch or two nearer the mantelpiece.

'You have my promise; pick it up. I won't wait any longer.'

Rupert's hand shot out behind him and was on the butt of one of the revolvers. The whole trick flashed on Rudolf, and he sprang forward, dropping his sword on the ground and flinging his long arms round Rupert. But Rupert had the revolver in his hand.

By now Rosa had given the alarm: Bernenstein and I had rushed up. Hard behind us came Rischenheim, and hot on his heels a score of fellows, pushing and shouldering and trampling. There was a confused din through all the house. I was conscious of it, although I paid no heed to anything but reaching the room where the King—where Rudolf—was. Now I was there, Bernenstein just behind. The door did not hold us a second. I was in, he after me. He slammed the door and set his back against it. And at that moment a revolver shot rang clear and loud.

The Lieutenant and I stood still, he against the door, I a pace farther into the room. The sight we saw was enough to arrest us with its strange interest. The smoke of the shot was curling about, but neither man seemed wounded. The revolver was in Rupert's hand, and its muzzle smoked. But Rupert was jammed against the wall, just by the side of the mantelpiece. With one hand Rudolf had pinned his left arm to the wall higher than his head, with the other he held his right wrist. Rudolf was very pale and his lips were set, but it was his eyes that caught my gaze, for they were glad and merciless. I had never seen him look thus before. I turned from him to young Hentzau's face. Rupert's teeth were biting his under lip, the sweat dropped and the veins swelled large and blue on his forehead; his eyes were set on Rudolf Rassendyll. Fascinated, I drew nearer. Then I saw what passed. Inch by inch Rupert's arm curved; the elbow bent, the hand that had pointed the revolver at Mr. Rassendyll pointed now towards the window. But its motion did not stop; it followed the line of a circle. The revolver, held still in Rupert's hand, was at his heart. The motion ceased, the point was reached.

I looked again at Rupert. He flung back his comely head and rested thus against the wall; his eyes asked a question of Rudolf Rassendyll. I turned my gaze to where the answer was to come, for Rudolf made none in words. By the swiftest of movements he shifted his grasp from Rupert's wrist and pounced on his hand. Now his forefinger rested on Rupert's, and Rupert's was on the trigger.

Rupert smiled to the last; his proud head, which had never bent for shame, did not bend for fear. There was a sudden tightening in the pressure of that crooked

forefinger, a flash, a noise. He was held up against the wall for an instant by Rudolf's hand; when that was removed he sank, a heap that looked all head and knees.

But hot on the sound of the discharge came a shout and an oath from Bernenstein. He was hurled away from the door, and through it burst Rischenheim, and the crowd after him. They were jostling one another and crying out to know what had passed and where the King was. But as soon as they were in the room, the same spell that had fastened Bernenstein and me to inactivity held them also. Only Rischenheim gave a sudden sob and ran forward to where his cousin lay. The rest stood staring. For a moment Rudolf faced them. Then, without a word, he turned his back. He put out the right hand with which he had just killed Rupert of Hentzau, and took the letter from the mantelpiece. He glanced at the envelope, then he opened the letter. The handwriting banished any last doubt he had; he tore the letter across, and again in four pieces, and yet again to smaller fragments. Then he sprinkled the morsels of paper into the blaze of fire. Thus at last the Queen's letter was safe.

When he had thus set the seal on his task, he turned round to us again.

'Gentlemen,' said he, 'a full account of this matter will be rendered by myself in due time. For the present it must suffice to say that this gentleman who lies here dead sought an interview with me on private business. I came here. And here he tried to kill me. The result of his attempt you see. Now let all leave me except the Count of Tarlenheim and Lieutenant von Bernenstein.'

Most unwillingly, with gaping mouths and wonder-struck eyes, the throng filed out of the door. Rischenheim rose to his feet.

'You stay, if you like,' said Rudolf, and the Count again knelt by his kinsman.

Seeing the rough bedsteads by the wall of the attic, I touched Rischenheim on the shoulder and pointed to one of them. Together we lifted Rupert of Hentzau, and laid him down, spreading over him his riding-cloak, still spotted with the mud gathered on his midnight expedition to the hunting-lodge. His face looked much as before the shot was fired; in death, as in life, he was the handsomest fellow in all Ruritania.

Rudolf seemed not to heed or think of him. He turned to me, and said:

'Come, let us go to the Queen and tell her that the letter is beyond reach of hurt.'

Moved by some impulse, I walked to the window and put my head out. I was seen from below and a great shout greeted me. The crowd before the doors grew every moment. What were we to tell that great concourse concerning their King? Bernenstein was by my side; he also looked out, and turned again with an eager face.

'You'll have a royal progress to your palace,' said he to Rudolf Rassendyll.

Mr. Rassendyll made no answer, but, coming to me, took my arm. We went out, leaving Rischenheim by the body. When we came to the foot of the stairs we found the two women. As soon as Rudolf came in sight the girl sprang forward and flung herself on her knees before him, pouring out thanks to Heaven for his safety. He disengaged his chain and took his gold watch from his pocket, and pressed it into the girl's hand, saying, 'Keep this to remind you of me.'

Then he passed on to where the old woman stood. He spoke to her in a stern, distinct voice.

'I don't know,' he said, 'how far you are a party to the plot that was hatched in your house. But take care! The first word you speak, the first act you do against me, the King, will bring its certain and swift punishment.'

She made no answer. Rudolf went on.

Bernenstein ran forward and flung the door open. Then, bowing very low, he stood aside to let Rudolf pass. The street was full from end to end now, and a mighty shout of welcome rose from thousands of throats. Hats and handkerchiefs were waved in triumphant loyalty. The tidings of the King's escape had flashed through the city, and all were there to do him honour. They had seized some gentleman's landau and taken out the horses. The carriage stood now before the door of the house. Rudolf had waited a moment on the threshold, lifting his hat once or twice; his face was perfectly calm, and I saw no trembling in his hands. He mounted the carriage; Bernenstein and I followed, with bare heads, and sat on the back seat, facing him. The people were round as thick as bees, and it seemed as though we could not move without crushing somebody. Yet presently the wheels turned and they began to drag us away at a slow walk. Rudolf kept raising his hat, bowing now to right, now to left.

At last we came in sight of the palace. Here also there was a great stir. I saw the Chancellor's carriage standing near the portico. Our human horses drew us slowly up to the entrance. Helsing was on the steps, and ran down to the carriage, greeting the King with passionate fervour. The shouts of the crowd grew louder still.

But suddenly a stillness fell on them; it lasted but an instant, and was the prelude to a deafening roar. I was looking at Rudolf, and saw his head turn suddenly and his eyes grow bright. I looked where his eyes had gone. There, on the top step of the broad marble flight, stood

the Queen, pale as the marble itself, stretching out her hands towards Rudolf. With a last salute to the people, Rudolf walked up to the highest step but one, and there fell on one knee and kissed the Queen's hand. I was by him, and when he looked up in her face I heard him say:

'All's well. He's dead, and the letter burnt.'

She raised him with her hand. She put her arm through his, and thus they stood for an instant, fronting all Strelsau. Again the cheers rang out, and young Bernenstein sprang forward, waving his helmet and crying like a man possessed, 'God save the King!' All the people took up the cry with boundless fervour, and thus we all, high and low in Strelsau, that afternoon hailed Mr. Rassendyll for our King.

At last we got away. We still heard the jests and cheers of the crowd outside when we were alone in the small saloon that opens on the gardens. My wife and I had come there at Rudolf's request; Bernenstein had assumed the duty of guarding the door. Evening was now falling fast, and it grew dark. Rudolf told us there the story of his struggle with Rupert of Hentzau in the attic of the old house, dwelling on it as lightly as he could.

'Fritz,' he whispered, 'as soon as it's fairly dark I must get away. Bernenstein will come with me. You must stay here.'

'Where can you go?'

'To the lodge. I must meet Sapt and arrange matters with him.'

'And the Queen?' I whispered.

Low as my voice was she heard it. She turned to us with a sudden startled movement. Then she suddenly sprang forward.

'Don't go, Rudolf! I can't bear it,' she cried.

Then he drew me aside.

He did not look at her. His lips were tight set and his face pale and drawn. From outside still came the cheers and tumult of the joyful excited crowd. Within there was no sound but the Queen's stifled sobbing. Rudolf gazed into the night with sad set eyes.

She raised her head and looked into his face.

'You'll break my heart,' she said.

## CHAPTER XIX

### FOR OUR LOVE AND HER HONOUR!

RUPERT of Hentzau was dead. That was the thought which among all our perplexities came back to me, carrying with it a wonderful relief. To me it was so great a thing that I could hardly bring myself to the conviction that we had done with him.

I stood looking out on the crowd which encircled the front of the palace. I was alone; Rudolf was with the Queen, my wife was resting, Bernenstein had sat down to a meal for which I could find no appetite. By an effort I tried to concentrate my brain on the facts of our position. We were ringed round with difficulties. To solve them was beyond my power; but I knew where my wish and longing lay. I wanted Rudolf Rassendyll to be King. My reverie led me far; I saw the future years unroll before me in the fair record of a great King's sovereignty.

For a long while I stood thus, musing and dreaming; I was roused by the sound of the door opening and closing; turning, I saw the Queen.

'He'll take the throne?' I cried triumphantly.

'No, no, no. He's going away.'

I was aghast at this shattering of my vision. I said nothing, but took her hand and pressed it.

'You wanted him to be King?' she whispered.

'With all my heart, madame,' said I.

'He wouldn't, Fritz. No, and I shouldn't dare to do that either.'

'I don't see how he can go,' I said sullenly.

She did not answer me. A moment later the door again opened. Rudolf came in, followed by Bernenstein. Both wore riding-boots and cloaks. I saw on Bernenstein's face just such a look of disappointment as I knew must be on mine. Rudolf seemed calm and even happy. He walked straight up to the Queen.

'The horses will be ready in a few minutes,' he said gently. Then, turning to me, he asked, 'You know what we are going to do, Fritz?'

'Not I, sire,' I answered sulkily.

'Not I, sire!' he repeated, in a half-merry, half-sad mockery. Then he came between Bernenstein and me and passed his arms through ours. 'You two villains!' he said. 'You two unscrupulous villains! Here you are as rough as bears, because I won't be a thief!'

I could not answer him. With every word from his lips and every moment of his presence my sorrow grew keener that he would not stay. Rudolf gave a little laugh.

'Now for the plan,' said he. 'Bernenstein and I set out at once for the lodge—yes, publicly, as publicly as we can. I shall ride right through the people there, letting it be known to everybody where I'm going. We shall get there quite early to-morrow, before it's light. Hullo, what's that?'

There was a sudden fresh shouting from the large crowd that still lingered outside the palace. I ran to the window and flung the sash up. Then I heard a well-known loud strident voice:

'Make way, you rascals, make way!'

I turned round again full of excitement.

'It's Sapt himself!' I said. 'He's riding like mad through the crowd, and your servant's just behind him.'

The minutes seemed very long as we waited in utter perplexity. The same thought was in the mind of all of

us. What could have brought them from their guard of the great secret? By some mishap the King's body must have been discovered.

At last the door was flung open, and a servant announced the Constable of Zenda. Sapt was covered with dust and mud, and James, who entered close on his heels, was in no better plight. Evidently they had ridden hard and furiously. Sapt came straight to where Rudolf stood.

'Is he dead?' he asked, without preface.

'Yes, Rupert is dead!' answered Mr. Rassendyll: 'I killed him.'

'And the letter?'

'I burnt it.'

Sapt flung himself in a chair and took off his gloves.

'Come, tell me what has happened to-day in Strelsau,' he said.

We gave a short and hurried account. He listened with a few signs of approval or disapproval; he had the air of a man with some news in reserve.

At the end of the story Rudolf turned to him.

'And your secret—is it safe?' he asked.

'Aye, it's safe enough and nobody knows that the King is dead,' answered Sapt.

'Then what brings you here?'

'I should like to hear your plan first. How do you mean to account for your presence alive in the city to-day, when the King has lain dead in the hunting-lodge since last night?'

We drew closer together as Rudolf began his answer. Sapt alone lay back in his chair. The Queen also had resumed her seat; she seemed to pay little heed to what we said.

'In an hour I must be gone from here,' began Rudolf.

'If you wish that, it's easy,' observed Colonel Sapt.

'Come, Sapt, be reasonable,' smiled Mr. Rassendyll. 'Early to-morrow we, you and I and Bernenstein, will be at the lodge.'

'That's not impossible, though I have had nearly enough riding.'

Rudolf fixed his eyes firmly on Sapt's.

'You see,' said he 'the King reaches his hunting-lodge early in the morning.'

'I follow you, sire.'

'And what happens there, Sapt? Does he shoot himself accidentally?'

'Well, that happens sometimes.'

'Or does his faithful attendant, Herbert, shoot him by accident—and then, in remorse, kill himself.'

'That's very pretty. But doctors know when a man can have shot himself.'

'My good Constable, doctors can be bribed.

'I think,' said Sapt, 'that both the plans are good. Suppose we choose the latter, what then?'

'Why, then, by to-morrow at mid-day the news flashes through Ruritania that the King has met a tragic end.'

'It will occasion great grief,' said Sapt.

'Meanwhile I am safe over the frontier.'

'Oh, you're quite safe?'

'Absolutely. And in the afternoon of to-morrow, you and Bernenstein will set out for Streisau, bringing with you the body of the King.'

Sapt rose to his feet and stood before Mr. Rassendyll.

'The plan's a pretty one, but it breaks down at one point,' said he in a strange voice, even harsher than his was wont to be. 'There is no body.'

Even Mr. Rassendyll's composure gave way. He sprang forward, catching Sapt by the arm.

'No body? What do you mean?' he exclaimed.

Sapt cast another glance at James, and then began in an even mechanical voice, as though he were reciting a lesson he had learnt.

'That poor fellow Herbert carelessly left a candle burning where the oil and the wood were kept,' he said. 'This afternoon, about six, James and I lay down for a nap after our meal. At about seven James came to my side and roused me. My room was full of smoke. The lodge was ablaze. I darted from my bed: the fire had made too much headway, we could not hope to quench it; we had but one thought——' He suddenly paused, and looked at James.

'But one thought, to save our companion,' said James gravely.

'We rushed to the door of the room where he was. I opened the door and tried to enter. It was certain death. James tried, but fell back. Again I rushed in. James pulled me back. We had to save ourselves. We gained the open door. The lodge was a sheet of flame. James started off in the hope of getting help. He found a party of charcoal-burners, and they came with him. The flames had burnt down now; and we approached the charred ruins. Everything was in ashes. But'—he lowered his voice—'we found what seemed to be the body of Boris the hound; in another room was a charred corpse, whose hunting-horn, melted to a molten mass, told us it had been Herbert the forester. And there was another corpse, almost shapeless, utterly unrecognizable. We saw it; the charcoal-burners saw it. None could tell who it was; only I and James knew. And we mounted our horses and have ridden here to tell the King.'

Sapt finished his lesson or his story. A sob burst from the Queen, and she hid her face in her hands.

Bernenstein and I, amazed at this strange tale, scarcely understanding whether it were jest or earnest, stood staring stupidly at Sapt. Then I plucked him by the sleeve, and asked, with something between a laugh and a gasp:

'Who was that other corpse, Constable?'

He turned his small keen eyes on me:

'A Mr. Rassendyll, a friend of the King's who with his servant James was awaiting his Majesty's return from Strelsau. His servant here is ready to start for England to tell Mr. Rassendyll's relatives the news.'

A few words had declared the device plainly enough in all its simplicity. Rudolf Rassendyll was dead, his body burnt to a cinder, and the King was alive, whole, and on his throne in Strelsau. Thus had Sapt fulfilled in action the strange story which James had unfolded to him in order to pass their idle hours at the lodge.

Suddenly Mr. Rassendyll spoke in clear short tones:

'This is all a lie, Sapt,' said he, and his lips curled in contemptuous amusement.

'It's no lie that the lodge is burnt and the bodies in it, and that half a hundred of the peasants know it, and that no man could tell the body for the King's. As for the rest, it is a lie. But I think the truth in it is enough to serve.'

The two men stood facing one another with defiant eyes. Rudolf had caught the meaning of the great and audacious trick which Sapt and his companion had played. It was impossible now to bring the King's body to Strelsau; it seemed no less impossible to declare that the man burnt in the lodge was the King. Thus Sapt had forced Rudolf's hand. But when I saw how Rudolf looked at him, I thought that they would go from the Queen's presence set on a deadly quarrel. Mr. Rassendyll, however, mastered his temper.

'You're all bent on making me a rascal,' he said coldly. 'Fritz and Bernenstein here urge me; you, Sapt, try to force me. James there is in the plot, for all I know.'

'I suggested it, sir,' said James quietly.

'As I thought—all of you! Well, I won't be forced. I see now that there's no way out of this affair, save one. That one I'll follow.'

We none of us spoke, but waited till he should be pleased to continue.

'Of the Queen's letter I will say nothing,' he pursued. 'But I will tell them that I'm not the King, but Rudolf Rassendyll; and that I played the King only in order to serve the Queen and punish Rupert of Hentzau. That will serve, and it will cut this net of Sapt's from about my limbs.'

He spoke firmly and coldly, so that when I looked at him I was amazed to see how his lips twitched and that his forehead was moist with sweat. Then I understood what a sudden, swift, and fearful struggle he had suffered, and how the great temptation had tortured him. I went to him and clasped his hand: this action of mine seemed to soften him.

'Sapt, Sapt,' he said, 'you almost made a rogue of me!'

Sapt did not respond to his gentler mood. He had been pacing angrily up and down the room. Now he stopped abruptly before Rudolf and pointed with his finger at the Queen.

'I make a rogue of you!' he exclaimed. 'And what do you make of our Queen, whom we all serve? Haven't I heard how she greeted you before all Strelsau as her husband? Will they believe that she didn't know her husband? And we, your friends? For we've

stood by you as we've stood by the Queen: Fritz and young Bernenstein here, and I. If this truth's told, who'll believe that we were loyal to the King, that we didn't know, that we weren't accomplices in the tricking of the King—may be in his murder?'

I had never seen the old fellow so moved; he carried me with him, as he carried Bernenstein. I know now that we were too ready to be convinced. His excited appeal seemed to us an argument. At least the danger to the Queen on which he dwelt was real and true and great.

Then a sudden change came over him. He caught Rudolf's hand and spoke to him again in a low broken voice.

'Lad,' he said, 'don't say "No!" I know nothing about your conscience, but this I know: the King's dead, and the place is empty; and I don't see what Almighty God sent you here for unless it was to fill it. Come, lad—for our love and her honour!'

I do not know what thoughts passed in Mr. Rassendyll's mind. His face was set and rigid. He made no sign when Sapt finished, but stood as he was, motionless, for a long while. Then he slowly bent his head and looked down into the Queen's eyes. For a while she sat looking back into his. Then she sprang up and threw herself at his feet crying:

'Yes, yes! For my sake, Rudolf—for my sake!'

'Are you too against me, my Queen?' he murmured.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE DECISION OF HEAVEN

We were half mad that night, Sapt and Bernenstein and I. Sapt busied himself in preparing the account of the fire at the hunting-lodge; it was to be communicated to the journals, and it told how Rudolf Rassendyll had come to visit the King, with James his servant, and, the King being summoned unexpectedly to the capital, had been awaiting his Majesty's return when he met his fate. At another table young Bernenstein was drawing up, under the Constable's direction, a narrative of Rupert of Hentzau's attempt on the King's life and the King's courage in defending himself.

But Rudolf himself had not spoken. Sapt's appeal and the Queen's imploring cry had shaken but not overcome him; he had wavered, but he was not won. To save the King he had played the King in old days, but he did not love to play the King when the profit of it was to be his own. Hence he was unmoved till his care for the fair fame of the Queen and the love of his friends joined to buffet his resolution. Then he faltered; but he had not fallen. With every hour that he was called the King, it became more impossible for him to bear any other name all his days. Therefore Sapt let Mr. Rassendyll doubt and struggle, while he himself wrote his story and laid his plans.

Before now the Queen had left us, persuaded to lie down and try to rest till the matter should be settled.

Rudolf walked to the window and seemed to lose himself for a moment in the contemplation of the

quiet night. There were no more than a few stragglers in the street now; the moon shone white and clear on the empty Square.

'I should like to walk up and down outside and think it over,' he said, turning to us; and, as Bernenstein sprang up to accompany him, he added, 'No. Alone.'

'Yes, do,' said old Sapt, with a glance at the clock, whose hands were now hard on two o'clock. 'Take your time, lad, take your time.'

So he left us, and then came that long time of scheming and planning, in which occupations an hour wore its life away. Rudolf had not passed out of the porch, and we supposed that he had betaken himself to the gardens, there to fight his battle.

At last the door opened, and to our astonishment the Queen entered. She was clad in a long white robe, and her hair hung on her shoulders, being but loosely bound with a riband. Her air showed great agitation, and without any greeting or notice of the rest she walked quickly across the room to me.

'The dream, Fritz!' she said. 'It has come again. I fell asleep, and then I saw him, Fritz—I saw him as plainly as I see you. They all called him King, as they did to-day; but they did not cheer. They were quiet, and they looked at him with sad faces. I could not hear what they said; they spoke in hushed voices. I heard nothing more than "The King, the King," and he seemed to hear not even that. He lay still. Fritz, Fritz, he looked as if he were dead! Where is he?'

'He has chosen to go walking, madame,' said Sapt, 'and to go alone. He is in the gardens.'

'The gardens!' she cried. 'Then let us look for him. Oh, you've let him walk in the gardens alone?'

She swept out of the room. Helga went with her, and

we all followed downstairs to the small saloon that looked on the garden. Outside the moon streamed brightly down on the broad gravel walk, and the great trees. The Queen made straight for the window. I followed her, and, having flung the window open, stood by her. I saw that Sapt had come near and stood on the other side of the Queen. My wife and the rest were behind, looking out where our shoulders left space.

There, in the bright moonlight, on the far side of the broad terrace, close by the line of tall trees that fringed its edge, we saw Rudolf Rassendyll pacing slowly up and down.

'There he is, madame,' said Sapt. 'Safe enough!'

Rudolf stopped short. He looked for a moment at the sky, then his glance dropped to the ground at his feet. A second later he jerked his head like a man who has settled something which caused him a puzzle. In an instant we knew that the question had found its answer. He was by now King or a fugitive. A thrill ran through us; I felt the Queen draw herself together at my side; Sapt's face was full of eagerness and he gnawed his moustache savagely. At last we could bear the suspense no longer. With one look at the Queen and another at me, Sapt stepped on to the gravel. He would go and learn the answer.

Rudolf turned his head. He saw Sapt, and he saw me also behind Sapt. He smiled composedly and brightly, but he did not move from where he was. He held out both hands towards the Constable and caught him in their double grasp, still smiling down in his face. I was no nearer to reading his decision, though I saw that he had reached a resolution that gave peace to his soul.

Sapt's voice came harsh and grating.

'Well?' he cried. 'Which is it to be? Backward or forward?'

Rudolf pressed his hands and looked into his eyes. The answer asked but a word from him. The Queen caught my arm; her rigid limbs seemed to give way, and she would have fallen if I had not supported her. At the same instant a man sprang out of the dark line of tall trees, directly behind Mr. Rassendyll. Bernenstein uttered a loud startled cry, and rushed forward. His hand flew to his side, and he ripped the heavy cavalry sword that belonged to his uniform from its sheath. A shot rang out through the quiet gardens. Mr. Rassendyll did not loose his hold of Sapt's hands, but he sank slowly on to his knees.

'Bauer!' cried Bernenstein.

In an instant he was across the path and by the trees. We saw the great sword flash high above Bernenstein's head and heard it whistle through the air. It crashed on the crown of Bauer's head, and he fell like a log to the ground. I ran forward and knelt by Mr. Rassendyll. He still held Sapt's hands, and by their help buoyed himself up. But when he saw me he let go of them and sank back against me, his head resting on my chest. He moved his lips, but seemed unable to speak. He was shot through the back. Bauer had avenged the master whom he loved.

There was a sudden stir from inside the palace. A moment later there was a rush of eager feet, and we were surrounded by officers and servants. Sapt had not uttered a word; his face was distorted with horror and bitterness. Rudolf's eyes were closed and his head lay back against me.

'A man has shot the King,' said I.

All at once I found James by me.

'I have sent for a doctor, my lord,' he said. 'Come, let us carry him in.'

He, Sapt, and I lifted Rudolf and bore him across the gravel terrace and into the little saloon. The Queen came up to us.

'Rudolf, Rudolf!' she whispered very softly.

He opened his eyes, and his lips bent in a smile. She flung herself on her knees and kissed his hand.

'The surgeon will be here directly,' said I.

Rudolf's eyes had been on the Queen. As I spoke he looked up at me, smiled again, and shook his head.

When the surgeon came Sapt and I assisted him in his examination. The Queen had been led away, and we were alone. The examination was very short. Then we carried Rudolf to a bed. All this time we had asked no questions of the surgeon, and he had given no information. We knew too well to ask: we had all seen men die before now, and the look on the face was familiar to us. James lifted his master's head and gave him a drink of water. Rudolf swallowed it with difficulty. Then I saw him feebly press James's hand, for the little man's face was full of sorrow.

I crossed over to the doctor.

'The King may live an hour, Count Fritz,' he said.

I went straight back to Rudolf Rassendyll. His eyes greeted me and questioned me. He was a man, and I played no silly tricks with him. I bent down and said:

'An hour, he thinks, Rudolf.'

His eyes closed again; old Sapt, who had not once spoken since the shot was fired, raised a haggard face to mine.

'We'd better fetch her to him,' he said hoarsely. I nodded my head.

Sapt went while I stayed by him. Bernenstein came to him, bent down and kissed his hand. The young fellow,

who had borne himself with such reckless courage and dash throughout the affair, was quite unmanned now, and the tears were rolling down his face. I could have been much in the same plight, but I would not before Mr. Rassendyll. He smiled at Bernenstein. Then he said to me:

'Is she coming, Fritz?'

'Yes, she's coming, sire,' I answered.

He noticed the style of my address; a faint amused gleam shot into his languid eyes.

'Well, for an hour, then,' he murmured, and lay back on his pillows.

She came, dry-eyed, calm, and queenly. We all drew back, and she knelt down by his bed, holding his hand in her two hands. Presently the hand stirred; she let it go; then, knowing well what he wanted, she raised it herself and placed it on her head, while she bowed her face to the bed. Her face rested close to his, and he seemed to speak to her, but we could not have heard the words even if we would. So they remained for a long while.

We drew a little nearer, for we knew that he would not be long with us now. Suddenly strength seemed to come upon him. He raised himself in his bed, and spoke in distinct tones:

'God has decided,' he said. 'I've tried to do the right thing through it all. Sapt, and Bernenstein, and you, old Fritz, shake my hand. No, don't kiss it. We've done with pretence now.'

We shook his hand as he bade us. Then he took the Queen's hand. Again she knew his mind, and moved it to his lips.

'In life and in death, my sweet Queen,' he murmured.

And thus he fell asleep.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE COMING OF THE DREAM

THERE is little need, and I have little heart, to dwell on what followed the death of Mr. Rassendyll. Bauer's lips were for ever sealed. Rischenheim was loyal to the pledge he had given to the Queen. The ashes of the hunting-lodge held their secret fast, and none suspected when the charred body which was called Rudolf Rassendyll's was laid to quiet rest in the graveyard of the town of Zenda, hard by the tomb of Herbert the forester. For we had rejected any idea of bringing the King's body to Strelsau and setting it in the place of Mr. Rassendyll's. As a King Rudolf Rassendyll had died, as a King let him lie. As a King he lay in his palace at Strelsau, while the news of his murder at the hands of a confederate of Rupert of Hentzau went forth to startle and appal the world.

Throughout the day people had been passing and repassing through the great hall. There, on a stately bier, surmounted by a crown and the drooping folds of the royal banner, lay Rudolf Rassendyll. He had lain there three days; the evening of the third had come, and early on the morrow he was to be buried. There is a little gallery in the hall, that looks down on the spot where the bier stood; here was I on this evening, and with me Queen Flavia. We were alone together, and together we saw beneath us the calm face of the dead man. He was clad in a white uniform; the riband of the Red Rose was across his breast. His hand held

a red rose, fresh and fragrant; Flavia herself had set it there, that even in death he might not miss the chosen token of her love. We watched the pomp round him, and the rows of people that came to bring a wreath for him or to look upon his face. I saw women come and go weeping, and men bite their lips as they passed by. Rischenheim came, pale-faced and troubled; and while all came and went, there, immovable, with drawn sword, in military stiffness, old Sapt stood at the head of the bier, his body never stirring from hour to hour through the long day.

A distant faint hum of voices reached us. The Queen laid her hand on my arm.

'It is the dream, Fritz,' she said. 'Hark! They speak of the King; they speak in low voices and with grief, but they call him King. It's what I saw in the dream. But he does not hear nor heed. No, he can't hear nor heed even when I call him my King.'

In great pomp we laid him to his rest in the vault of the Kings of Ruritania in the Cathedral of Strelsau. There he lies among the Princes of the House of Elphberg. I think that if there be indeed any consciousness among the dead, or any knowledge of what passes in the world they have left, they should be proud to call him brother. There rises in memory of him a stately monument, and people point it out to one another as the memorial of King Rudolf.

Times change for all of us. Sapt is an old man now: soon my sons will be grown up, men enough themselves to serve Queen Flavia. Yet the memory of Rudolf Rassendyll is fresh to me as on the day he died. To me it seems now as though all had ended well. I must not be misunderstood: my heart is still sore for the loss of him. But we saved the Queen's fair fame, and to Rudolf himself

the fatal stroke came as a relief from a choice too difficult. To this day I know not how he chose. Yet he had chosen, for his face was calm and clear.

Come, I have thought so much of him that I will go now and stand before his monument, taking with me my last-born son, a little lad of ten. He is not too young to desire to serve the Queen, and not too young to learn to love and reverence him who sleeps there in the vault and was in his life the noblest gentleman I have known.

I will take the boy with me and tell him what I may of brave King Rudolf. And while we stand there I will turn again into his native tongue the inscription that the Queen wrote with her own hand, directing that it should be inscribed in Latin over the tomb: 'To Rudolf, who reigned lately in this city, and reigns for ever in her heart.—QUEEN FLAVIA.'

I told him the meaning, and he spelt the big words over in his childish voice; at first he stumbled, but the second time he had it right, and recited the Latin with a little touch of awe in his fresh young tones.

I felt his hand tremble in mine, and he looked up in my face.

'God save the Queen, father,' said he.

THE END

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